







THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

THE READER'S LIBRARY

Uniform with this Volume

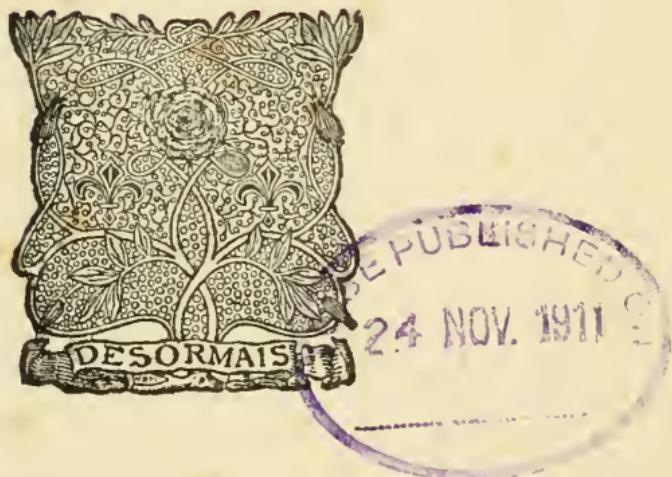
- Avril. By HILAIRE BELLOC. Essays on the Poetry of the French Renaissance.
- Esto Perpetua. By H. BELLOC. Algerian Studies and Impressions.
- Obiter Dicta. By AUGUSTINE BIRRELL. First and Second Series complete in one volume.
- Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer. By GEORGE BOURNE.
- The Bettsworth Book. By GEORGE BOURNE.
- Studies in Poetry. By STOPFORD A. BROOKE, LL.D. Essays on Blake, Scott, Shelley, Keats, etc.
- Comparative Studies in Nursery Rhymes. By LINA ECKENSTEIC. Essays in a branch of Folk-lore.
- Italian Poets since Dante. Critical Essays. By W. EVERETT.
- Villa Rubein, and Other Stories. By JOHN GALSWORTHY.
- Progress, and Other Sketches. By R. B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM.
- Green Mansions. A Romance of the Tropical Forest. By W. H. HUDSON.
- The Purple Land. By W. H. HUDSON.
- The Spirit of the People. An Analysis of the English Mind. By FORD MADOX HUEFFER
- The Soul of London. By FORD MADOX HUEFFER.
- After London—Wild England. By RICHARD JEFFERIES.
- Amaryllis at the Fair. By RICHARD JEFFERIES.
- Bevis. The Story of a Boy. By RICHARD JEFFERIES.
- The Hills and the Vale. By RICHARD JEFFERIES.
- St. Augustine and his Age. An Interpretation. By JOSEPH McCABE.
- Essays in Freedom. By H. W. NEVINSON.
- The Strenuous Life, and Other Essays. By THEODORE ROOSEVELT.
- English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century. By SIR LESLIE STEPHEN.
- Studies of a Biographer. First Series. By SIR LESLIE STEPHEN. Two Volumes.
- Studies of a Biographer. Second Series. By SIR LESLIE STEPHEN. Two Volumes.
- Essays on Dante. By DR. CARL WITTE.

DUCKWORTH & CO., LONDON

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

BY

FORD MADOX HUEFFER



LONDON: DUCKWORTH & CO.
3 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN

BRADBURY, AGNEW AND CO., LTD.
PRINTERS,
LONDON AND TONBRIDGE

[*All Rights Reserved.*]

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA BARBARA

TO

HENRY JAMES.





CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S ADVERTISEMENT . . . *Page xi*

INTRODUCTORY. THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN.

The Restaurant.—The Islands of the Blest.—The man from the Heart of the Country.—The mirage.—The change in our language.—The permanence of the idea.—Leaving town.—Each man's heart.—The great view.—The “note” of the country one of pain.—The empty room.—The belief in romance.—The watcher by the bedside.—The country in inverted commas.—The Antæus town.—The scientists.—The townsman's difficulty in becoming a countryman.—He discovers his ignorance.—The stages of a country life.—The townsman's induction.—The landowner's point of view.—The child in the country.—The slum child.—The hopper.—The railway porter.—Going to a cricket match.—Views.—“What a lot a fellow could do if he owned all that” . . *Page i*

CHAPTER I. BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS.

The individuality of roads.—Turnpikes.—The ghosts on them.—Solitary roads.—The real roads of the country.—What the country is.—The railway hedgerows—Quickssets.—The two points of view.—Different travellers.—Tramps.—Their castles in Spain.—

CONTENTS

The tooth-comb tramp.—His fear of solitude.—Other tramps.—Their ideals.—The German poet.—The townsman and the tramp.—Travellers who might be rescued.—The Union.—Remarkable paupers.—The carrier's cart.—Its users.—Its route.—Gossip.—The countryman's memory.—A judgment on “Old F.”—The cart in a river.—Rustic independence.—The townsman learns his place.—Cap-service.—The welcome home.—The return to the land.—The Covent Garden porter.—Moving.—Its costliness.—The farm waggon in the British Museum.—The captive waggoner.—Where there is an exchange.—By-roads.—Who uses them.—The squirrel on the high-road.—Market-day.—Country centres. *Page 33*

CHAPTER II. ACROSS THE FIELDS.

Getting the lie of the land.—The man who loves his home.—The man who loves the footpaths.—The country in undress.—New Place.—The loafer gains dignity.—The Midland squire.—The squire abroad.—Trespassing.—The number of paths across England.—Pilgrim ways.—Pack tracks.—Cinder paths.—The student of nature.—Nature and the countryman.—The oil beetle.—To what end?—Linky.—White, ominous of death.—The townsman and nature books.—Hasty pudding.—The old looker.—The sunset.—Potato digging.—The countryman and the supernatural.—The sick nurse.—The inquest.—Bizarre beliefs.—The feeling of familiarity.—Refuge from one's self.—The hunting field.—Other field sports.—The naturalist.—The breakdown.—The invalid and the mirror.—The vocation of the fields *Page 71*

CHAPTER III. IN THE COTTAGES.

The two-dwelling house.—Meary.—Her appearance.—Her philosophy.—Her biography.—Her folk-lore.—Her religious beliefs.—Her man.—She meets a ghost.—Her daily life.—Her death.—Her

CONTENTS

money.—The belief in hoardings.—Its counter-part in France.—A conversation in the Café de l'Espérance.—The peasant and retiring.—Improvidence.—Money spent on drink.—Children.—Old couples.—The informer's descendants.—Rest in the country.—The power of the peasant.—His want of corporate self-consciousness.—The peasant's print.—The absence of youths in the country.—The village maiden *Page 107*

CHAPTER IV. TOILERS OF THE FIELD.

Driven in by the weather.—The retired soldier.—The looker.—Sunshine.—Their views of men who wear black coats.—Cases in Chancery.—The countryman's reason for keeping a shut head.—Differences in dialect.—The countryman, a man of the world.—What you expect of a gentleman.—The carpenter and the Financier.—S.—His venerability.—He annexes a guinea.—W—n.—A comparatively honest man.—His industry.—His toleration of other people's thefts.—His biography.—His humble ambition.—His mates.—The influence of woodlands upon character.—A woodland Heart of the Country.—Bad villages.—The parson's power for good or evil.—The countryman and the Church.—The countryman and superstitions.—Ghosts.—Witches and White doctors.—The countryman and death.—N— and how he died.—The Yorkshire stone mason.—The raw material of the world.

Page 133

CHAPTER V. UTOPIAS.

D——d.—Its glories.—Superlatives.—Its uninterestingness.—The old story.—Great houses not based on the plough.—The use of ascertaining what is the best cowhouse. Cold storage.—The usual castle in Spain.—English country life and outdoor life.—Climate responsible for this.—Returning from hunting.—Parallel afforded by the sagas.—The country house in wet weather.—Lack

CONTENTS

of intellectual interest in the country.—The real landowner.—His problems.—Landowning no longer pays.—The small landowner.—His love for his acres.—The tenant farmer large and small.—The small farmer the real stumbling-block.—A personal view.—A personal Utopia.—Scheme for a syndicate possessed of a million pounds sterling.—A career.—Town legislation for the country.—Cottages and the truck-system.—A dream.—Conflicting Utopias.—The man from Lincolnshire.—The Northerners.—The Tory.—The advanced thinker.—The political economist.—Return to nature derided.—Another Utopia.—Babel.—The awakening . *Page 165*

L'ENVOI—“BY ORDER OF THE TRUSTEES.”

The field auction.—The sheep.—The buyers assemble.—The sale begins.—Why we never laugh at tools.—In the idiot's shed.—The auctioneer.—A public jester.—The country paper at Michaelmas.—The passing of farmers.—Change, the note of all countrysides.—Old Hooker.—His team of black oxen.—“It isn't the same place at all.”—The invisible presence of the dead.—The odiousness of restorations.—The eventual acceptability of other changes.—A late October walk.—The unchanging valley.—Leaders of caravans *Page 203*

AUTHOR'S ADVERTISEMENT.

THE present volume forms the second of three small projections of a View of Modern Life; it is a natural sequel to a former work, the "*Soul of London*." Its author has attempted to do in this volume just as much as in the former one he attempted to do for a modern city. As the "*Soul of London*" was made up of a series of illustrations to a point of view, so the "*Heart of the Country*" is a series of illustrations to country moods. The subject of the "*Country*" being so vast a one the limits of the attempt must be obvious. Every man, in fact, has a sort of ideal countryside—perhaps it is a Utopian vision that he conjures up at will within his own brain, perhaps it is no more than as it were a mental "composite photograph" of all the countrysides that he knows more or less well. It is this latter vision of his own, this survey of several countrysides that he knows more or less intimately, and of many countrysides that he has passed through or visited for longer or shorter periods—it is some such

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

mental “composite photograph” that the author of such a book must attempt to render upon paper. In this book the writer has followed implicitly the rule laid down for himself in the former volume, and the rule that he has laid down for himself for the forthcoming volume of this trilogy; that is to say, that though for many years he has read many works, returns, or pamphlets dealing with rural questions, and though these may have tinged his views and coloured his outlook, he has attempted here to do no more and no less than to depict—that is the exact word—his personal view of his personal countryside. This particular countryside limits itself strictly to that portion of the British Isles that is most psychologically English. It leaves out the greater portion of Yorkshire, which is, in most of its conditions, a part of Lowland Scotland; on the west it runs no further north than Carlisle; it neglects Wales. Within these limits it gives, as well as the powers of depiction of its projector have allowed, a rendering of a rural cosmogony. If the attempt appear somewhat megalomaniac, it has been undertaken nevertheless in a spirit of true humility by a person who, having spent the greater number of his years in one or other Heart of the Country, has a very wholesome fear of awakening all the sleeping dogs of controversies most heated and most bewildering. At the same time it leaves unsaid

AUTHOR'S ADVERTISEMENT

nothing that its author wished dispassionately to record. It preaches no particular sermon ; it announces no particular message ; it is practically no more than a number of impressions arranged after a certain pattern and in a certain order. (What that order is may be seen if the reader who is interested in the matter will refer to the paragraph that occupies the greater part of page 22 and a small portion of page 23.)

F. M. H.

WINCHELSEA, April, 1906.

NOTE.—A number of extracts, selected from the completed book by the Editor, have appeared in the columns of the *Tribune*: the book itself was written without any eye to such a form of publication.



6

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN



I

B

INTRODUCTORY.

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN.

IN the cigarette smoke, breathing the rich odours of ragouts that cloy the hunger, of verveine, of patchouli, beneath tall steely-blue mirrors, over crumpled napkins of an after-lunch in a French place of refection, an eloquent and persuasive friend with wide gestures was discoursing upon some plan that was to make for the rest of the company fame, fortune, rest, appetite, and the wherewithal to supply it—an engrossing plan that would render the Islands of the Blest territory habitable for them almost as soon as they could reach the “next street,” which, in most of our minds, is the Future. Their heads came close together across the table; outside in the narrow street carts rattled; all round them was that atmosphere of luxuries of a sort, with an orchestral accompaniment of knives thrown down, of orders shouted in French, in Italian, in Spanish; words in broken English, words in tones of command, of anger, of cynical passion, of furtive enjoyment—a sort of surf-sound, continuous, rising and falling, but

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

utterly beyond analysis. And, as if it were a compartment that shut them in from all the world, beneath the shelter of this Babel they discussed their Eldorado of the day after to-morrow — their dim Cyclades of the next street.

Those names, those myths shining so graciously down the ages, have still for humanity a great fascination. In one or the other of them each soul of us finds his account. Dim Cyclades, Eldorados, Insulæ Beatæ, Happy Hunting Grounds, Lands flowing with Milk and Honey, Avalons, or mere Tom Tiddler's Grounds — somewhere, between the range of dim islands of a purple west, or that field where we shall pick up gold and silver — somewhere in that vast region is the spot that each of us hopes to reach, to which all our strivings tend, towards which all our roads lead. The more close and airless the chamber from which we set out the more glorious, no doubt, the mirage; the longer the road, the more, no doubt, we shall prize the inn at the end — the inn that we shall never reach; the inn that is our goal precisely because we never can reach it by any possible means. But in bands, in companies, in twos or threes or singly — in labourers' cottages, in omnibuses, in tall offices, we discuss each plan that shall bring us one step nearer, or in the dark silences of our own hearts we cherish a passion so fierce and so solitary that no single soul else in all the universe has a hint of our madness, our presumption, our glorious ambition, or our baseness.

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

Thus in that dubious place of refection the one friend could well enough discourse to his companions upon their common Eldorado that should, the gods being good, give them fame—and rest. It held them, the idea, among all the clatter; it made glorious with its glamour the foul atmosphere. It was, as the slang phrase has it, a master idea. Suddenly, pushing out from behind the door, came a long, grey, bronzed man.

Bewilderment at being torn from their train of thought, surprise, recognition, were the steps towards immense pleasure.

“You!” slipped from all their lips at once. He dropped his great length into a small chair placed askew at the corner of the table, and began to talk about the country.

He had just come up from the Heart of the Country! He was a man always very wonderful for them, as to most of us in our childhood the people are who have a command over beasts and birds, who live in the rustle of woodlands, and commune with ringdoves as with spiders. We credit them with powers not our own, with a subtle magic, a magnetism more delicate than that which gives power over crowds of men—with keener eyesight, quicker hearing, and a velvety touch that can caress small creatures. They have something faun-like, something primeval, something that lets us think that, in touch with them, we are carried back into touch with an earlier world before cities were, and before the nations of men had

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

boundaries. There are naturalists—but these men are not naturalists; they come out of no studies; in museums they shudder and are disquieted, just as gipsies are vaguely unrestful when you ask them to enter your house. In the towns these men will see things that we never see; they will note the fall of sparrows, or, sailing through the air a mile above the cross of St. Paul's, a sea-hawk will be visible to them. Into the towns they will bring a touch of sweetness and of magic—because they come from the Heart of the Country.

He was all in grey, so that against an old stone wall you would hardly have seen him, or on a downside no bird would startle at passing him. It happened that he mentioned the precise green valley that for one of those men was the Heart of the Country. It nestles beneath a steep, low cliff, in the heart of an upland plain as vast and as purple, as wavering and as shadeless as the sea itself. But the green valley runs along a bottom, a little winterbourne directing its snake's course; trees fill it and overshadow old stone houses, and it is alive with birds driven to it for water from the plains above.

So that, green and sinuous, a mirage seemed to dazzle and hang in air in the middle of the cigarette smoke, making a pattern of its own, vivid and thirst-inspiring, across the steely-blue of the restaurant mirrors. It seemed to waver right above, and to extinguish the luminous idea—to extinguish the very

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

light of their Eldorado. They talked of place after place, pursuing the valley along its course, of a great beacon here, a monolith there, of millponds and villages that run one into another, boasting each one a name more pleasant in the ear, or a tuft of elms higher and more umbrageous. For if each man have (and each of us has) his own Heart of the Country, to each assuredly that typical nook, that green mirage that now and then shines between him and his workaday world, will be his particular Island of the Blest, his island of perpetual youth, his closed garden, which as the years go on will more and more appear to contain the Fountain of Youth. And as time goes on, too, life will assume more and more an air of contest between the two strains of idealism in the man—a contest between the Tom Tiddler's Ground of the Town and Islands of the Blest that lie somewhere in the Heart of the Country.

These metaphors, this ideal of an island smoothness in Hyperborean seas, are not the less true because they are not part of our present vernacular. Our necessities, our modes of travel, our very speech, have changed ; the necessity for that ideal remains. Whilst, indeed, our speech was forming itself, they wrote books with titles like “Joyful Newes from the West Over Seas,” and still in the tangible unknown West, they could hope to find Happy Valleys. Now with a mapped-out world we can no longer have that hope. We travel still with that ideal, but the hope has grown intangible.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

On the one hand the world has become very small, since we may have it all in a book, in pink, in green, in yellow squares. We can reach any portion of it so easily, we may have so easily pictures of it all, that it is hardly worth the seeking. Intellectually, we have learned that there is no Island of the Blest ; in our inmost selves, automatically, we never acknowledge it. We have brought our island nearer home ; it lies beyond the horizon, but only just beyond. In a sense we may even hope to reach it by the most commonplace of methods. For the mere taking of a pill there may be ours health, which is the fountain of youth ; for the mere pulling the ropes of a machine, for just waving our arms in certain magical postures before dressing in the morning, there shall—so the advertisements say—be ours a day of vigorous and unclouded brain, a day that shall see us, unhandicapped by any bodily ill, descend to do our battles in the market-place—a day in the land of Eldorado. Thus do the clamant charlatans of the beyond in the pale columns of our journals attempt to play upon strings that three thousand or three hundred years ago were rendered sweet by the melodies of those other charlatans who were once living poets.

These things we only half believe in, even in this England, which for the rest of the world is the “Land of Pills.” But observe the face of your interlocutor when you tell him that you are going into the country. Observe the half envy, half yearning, the mixture of reminiscence and of forecasting plans that

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

will waver across his face, and mark all the shades of expression in his “Lucky you!”

Round the flat, dark, toilsome town there is the vast green ring, the remembrance of which so many men carry nowadays in their hearts. Put it, if you will, that its attraction is simply that of the reverse of the medal, that it is a thing they love merely because it is not theirs’.

Its real pull is felt, the rope is cast off, when, in his club, on his mantelpiece at home or at his suburban post-office, the townsman leaves directions for his letters to be forwarded. At that blessed moment he loses touch with the world, casts off his identity, heaves a sigh as if a great weight had fallen from his shoulders, or even moves his limbs purposelessly in order to realise to the fullest how a free man feels. He has shaken off his identity. For as long as the mood lasts he cannot be traced, he cannot be recalled to earth. And supposing he never went to the spot to which his letters are to be addressed—supposing that, instead of taking train to that fly-fisher’s inn, to that moorland farm, or to that friend’s manor house, he went afoot to the shore of a Devonshire sea, he might never be found again. He might shake off all responsibilities; he might form ties lighter to bear than the lightest snaffle that ever horse submitted to. He might find a threshold over which, when he stepped in the morning, his feet would go lightly, his eyes glance confidently over fields, seas, and skies of a fabulous brightness.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

He never does it—at least he has never done it since here the townsman is and here, in whatever particular town of life he has an abiding place—here he is likely to remain. Some no doubt break the chain. It has been asked, as we know well enough, “What’s become of Waring since he gave us all the slip?” But they never know, they who form the “us all” of the line. Waring has disappeared—gone; he no longer exists; the Heart of the Country has swallowed him up. He was a weak man who broke; those remaining are the strong, who shiver a little sometimes at the thought that they may do as Waring did.

The mood may last him for an hour or two; it obsesses him a little as he leans back in his train—the fact is still there; his letters are being forwarded to a place that he has not yet reached. For a little time he is still in the grey of the town; its magazines, its papers, its advertisements hold his eyes immediately. Gradually through the glass that encages us he sees the green flicker through the grey of the outskirts, as through the ragged drab skirts of a child you may catch the flash of her knee when she runs. The cloak spread over the ground becomes a covering less and less efficient; then it is all green, and amongst a geometrical whirl of corded posts turning slowly right away to the horizon he shall see the figures of women with blue handkerchiefs over their heads kneeling down and tying the hops.

But that is still all remote, all shadowy. His

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

lungs are quite literally filled with the air of his town. It is only when he steps out at his junction where he "changes" that he is conscious of some strange and subtle difference. On his forehead he feels a sudden coolness, his foot falls more lightly, he draws a deeper breath. It is because he is breathing the breath of a free wind.

So he crosses the platform, and in the gloaming gets into the smaller, dirtier, stuffier and darker, and how infinitely more romantic, boxes that will carry him through a fast darkening land into his particular Heart of the Country.

* * * * *

Each man of us has his own particular Heart, even as each one has his own particular woman. And the allegiance that he pays to it is very similar. He has his time of passionate longing, of enjoyment, of palling perhaps, or of a continually growing passion that is a fervour of jealousy much such as a man may feel for his wife. He has his love of the past, or he has been whirled past places that later he will hope to make his; he has, and always, his ideal.

This he will never attain to. Put him upon a great hill. Below him there will stretch plains almost infinite; down into them the slopes on which he stands wave and modulate indefinitely. Above his head is the real blue infinity; on his left hand the purple sea, with just a touch of the pink shore of another land that may carry the mind to distances

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

yet more vast. At his back there are grey silences; before his face, miles and miles away in the heart of the sunset, there are dim purplish hills, like a lion couchant, stretched out in a measureless ease. To this height he may have attained with great labour; until he reached it it had represented his ideal. But after the first intaking of free air into the lungs he will see those dim and glamorous hills. And just beyond them once more his ideal will lie hidden. A moment later, too, he will remember that in the valley that he crossed to reach this height there were an old mill with a great pond in which swallows dipped, an old wheel revolving in a dripping tracery of green weeds, a stream running down a valley all aflame with kingcups. This old mill that he passed nonchalantly enough may, he remembers when he stands upon the height, contain his ideal chamber; or if he had followed the slow stream through the marsh marigolds that would brush against his knees he might find the particular Herb Oblivion that he seeks; or, lying down within sound of that old wheel, he might by its incessant plash be lulled into slumbers how easy!

Thus along with him he will carry always those two small fardels, regret for neglected loves, longing for the unattainable. No doubt at times he will drop them. We differ much in these things. Some men will feel all burdens drop from them for a time when they buffet an immense wind; others, again, are lulled into a pleasant doze in the immense heat and

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

haze of sheep-downs at noon ; upon some an immense placidity is shed when in the late twilight they step across the threshold of their inn into the mistiness of a village street, when they hang over the stones of a bridge and see waving in the eddies of a trout-stream the reflection of rosy cottage windows.

These moods are rare enough ; yet they give for us the “ note ” of the country, and certain of them stand out for us through all our lives. Thus I remember, years ago, running down through veiled moonlight, between hedges that were a shimmering blaze of cow-parsley, upon a bicycle that by some miracle of chance ran so smoothly that I was unconscious of it as of myself. And the gentle slope was five miles long. It was one of those sensations that are never forgotten ; it was one that may hardly be recaptured, unless, indeed, the hereafter be one long lying on the tides of the winds.

For many—perhaps, if one knew the secrets of all hearts, one would say for all humanity that is really tied to the towns—the “ note ” of the country is one of pain. This not because the country herself is sad—she is only passionless—but because she is the confidante of so many sorrows. The townsmen tear themselves to pieces among the spines that abound where men dwell. Their friends, their vocations, their taxes, their rail service, their mistresses, their children, their homes, all the creaking doors and monotonous wall-papers—all these things grow wearisome, grow nauseous, grow at last terrible even, and

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

so they take to the country for consolation. Sometimes they find it. Sometimes the country, like a jealous wife, will say, "No, you bring yourself to me only in your worst moods. Find another consoler." That, however, happens seldom, and, as a rule, we discover eventually that she has acted for the best in one way or another.

I know, for instance, a man whose Heart of the Country is a certain empty room in a labourer's stone cottage in the backwater of a tiny inland village. He remembers it always as it was at night, with all the doors and windows open in a breathless June, and two candles burning motionlessly above white paper. The peculiar whimper of sheep bells comes always down the hill through the myriad little noises of the night. In the rare moments when the bells cease there comes the mournful and burdensome cry of the peewits on the uplands. If this too is silent there is the metallic little tinkle of a brook on pebbles, the flutter of night moths beating against the walls and ceiling of the lit room. The room itself contains nothing save a table, a chair, a shaving-glass and a razor, a pen and a little ink in an egg-cup; and the black night, magical and gleaming, peers through the open windows and the open door. It was like, so my friend tells me, being hidden in a little lighted chamber of an immense cavern—a place deep down in the eternal blackness of the earth's centre.

And, according to his view, no man in the world

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

was ever more terribly burdened with griefs of a hundred kinds. The inflictions that Fate can bestow upon a man are ingenious and endless; he may have, say, the temperament of a poet, a hopeless passion, a neglected genius, the disclosure of hidden basenesses in himself, the consciousness of personal failure, the ingratitude of friends; or at given moments the whole circle of his life may seem to crumble away and leave him naked beneath the pitiless stars. Let us say that all these calamities had overwhelmed this particular Waring. In that solitude and blackness he fought, unavailingly enough, against these devils; he tried to people that room with figures of his own imagination, so that still in remembrance he seems to see a whole gallantry-show of kings and queens in mediæval garnitures passing dimly from door to door. At times the razor that lay on the shelf behind his back had the fascination of a lodestone, and on a hot, blazing moonlight night he would rush out from his room and wander, appalled and shaken, to the middle of the white silent village, with the thatches on the wall-tops silver, and the shadows vertical beneath the moon. And then from the little village bakery there came always the constant and unchanging thrill of a single cricket—a monotonous sound that seems to be shaken out upon the air as a powder may be shaken from a box with a pierced lid.

Thus that cave-like, cool room, those hot nights

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

and that thrill of the cricket, those shadows and that fascination of an instrument that should bring a swift and utter change, the slumbrous cottage faces, the imagined and shadowy pageants, the creaking cry of the peewits and the clamorous whimper of sheep-bells—all these things, fusing together and forming a little fold in space and time, go to make what remains for my friend his Heart of the Country. He did not in that solitude find any alleviation, but, perhaps because his particular cross drew him away from the real contemplation of material objects, that spot remains to him something glamorous, something mysterious. Probably on account of those woeful associations he will never go back to that spot, and so it will remain for him to all time remote and wonderful.

Thus that glamour and mystery are what he gained from that stay; and that subtle witch, the Country, if she gave with one hand neither composure nor good health, those illusions that are our daily bread, gave with the other hand that other illusion, blessed in its way—the belief that the earth holds valleys filled with romance and mystery.

The powers of the country, its powers over our moods, are not illimitable. At times hills, great skies, bright hedgerows, or barns the thatch of which is a network of mosses and flowers—at times all these things are mockeries upon whose surface the very sunlight lies like a blight. But at times, again, she achieves the impossible, and serene twilights, the

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

chorus of birds at dawn, the sound of children's voices from deep woods or the blue floors of coppices in May, some immensely vivid sight or some indefinitely complicated sound, some overwhelming odour or the feel of the wind on the forehead, some blessed touch from the material world will pierce through the cloud of gloom that besets poor humanity at its lower ebbs. And it is these things that are unforgettable, it is these things that keep us going.

Other men will remember having watched by a sick bed for several days and nights in succession, in a house full of sickness, waiting all the time for a temperature to fall. The drag of such nights and days becomes terrible towards four in the morning. A man sits in a twilight too dim to read by, he fears to move lest the tinkle of medicine bottles awaken the sleeper. He dare not sleep, he dare hardly think for fear that sleep will overcome him. He remembers, on the third or fourth of these nights, a feeling like breaking, a tightening of the screw until it seems that something must burst, so that without more deliberation it is a necessity to be out of doors for a second, for a minute, for however tiny a space of change.

Out of doors there is coolness, the merest shimmer of grey above the distant sea, the slow shaking out of rays from a lighthouse that seems to be lessening its pace out of weariness and because the dawn is at hand; flowers and leaves appear indistinct and visionary, the air is absolutely motionless. And

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

suddenly there comes a waft of light right across the sky; a rook caws from the trees high overhead—then the voices of the whole colony, soothing and multitudinous; a breeze stirs a spray of hops. The corner is turned, the night is over.

It does, perhaps, consecrate the memory that, going back to the close room, one may find that at last the temperature of the sufferer has fallen, but the unforgettable psychological relief comes with that stir of the dawn breeze, and that sudden motion of the hop tendrils is the acknowledgment that we are no longer alone in a dead world.

* * * * *

All this is no doubt about “the country,” inverted commas—about the land from the outside. It is one of the anomalies of our present civilisation that the majority of self-conscious humanity—the majority, at least, of those who read books—should regard unbuilt-upon land from that outside. It is a fact physically more remarkable in its way than the earliest systems of cosmogonies. That the earth should contain the universe was thinkable enough. That the cities should contain “the country” is one of those unthinkable things that have passed into the subconsciousness of a great section of mankind.

Hitherto, through the course of history the country has seemed to triumph inevitably. The image of the struggle has been not so much a moving of the pendulum between town and country, but a kind of

Antæus-town giant has gained its strength only by touching the ground ; or, if you will, the image is that of a bird that may soar but must come back to earth. The country has "had the pull" because in their origins all foods and all the necessaries of life came from seeds of one kind or another, the chain going always through the carnivora and the cotton mills to end eventually in vegetation.

But modern scientific thinkers proclaim that this chain is broken. Foods exquisite and nourishing are to be made from mineral oils and acids ; raiment of glorious dye and skin-caressing texture is to be had from all sorts of coal-tar products. The necessity for the Nature of green fields is at an end, according to the New Millennialists. These scientists adopt towards that particular Mother Nature an angry and querulous tone ; they accuse her of producing a slow-witted race of men, of hindering social progress, of fostering an anti-human malady, the desire for solitude. And indeed to-day I read in an organ of advanced thought that "the country stock, which some reformers have been demanding as an invigorating and necessary renewal of the city race, is likely to prove positively harmful, as adding an element not adjusted to city conditions." The city, in fact, is said to have bred its own type.

And once outside the country habit of mind the townsman finds a considerable difficulty in getting back to a more psychological possession of a country life. He may buy land, he may even take to rearing

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

stock, which is supposed to be the surest passport to some sort of social standing in the country ; his face may become bronzed, his raiment approximate to that of the half-golfer, half-horse-coper, which is nowadays the country's undress livery ; but he will not, save thus externally, get very much nearer to being a countryman.

It may appear paradoxical, but it is as a matter of fact a truism that country life is in all its branches a singularly complicated matter. In a month or so a man may get to know a town sufficiently for all practical purposes. Generalised, all bricks and mortar are much the same ; all town streets fall under wide headings, and town societies are easily classed within comfortable limits.

But your clever man of the world set down in the country is, as soon as he opens his eyes, confronted with an ignorance of his own that will at first render him infuriated with the ignorance that he meets all round him.

It will end, if his eyes remain open, in a modest disbelief in his own mental powers. He will discover the bewildering idiosyncrasies of each component factor of the social life of villages and small towns ; he will discover that it is possible to make Montague-Capulet quarrels out of grounds incredibly unimportant in his point of view ; he will discover that, broad-minded and aloof as he may be, he himself, if in any sense he "lives" in the place, will become involved over head and ears in these small feuds ;

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

and a little later he will discover himself—himself as an entity cast inward upon itself for intellectual support, for interest, for employment, and for life.

It is, perhaps, then only that he will discover that he knows nothing and probably never will know anything appreciable of what in the cant of the day is called Nature; and to the measure of his humanity and of his thirst for knowledge he will be irritated or saddened by the amount of time that he will think he has lost in the cities. The amassing of his fortune such as it is will seem a small thing compared with the fact that in amassing it he has so spoilt his quickness of apprehension that he can never hope to distinguish the flight of a redshank from that of a sandpiper. And the longer he lives, or the longer his interest remains alive, the deeper will his thoughts penetrate. He will discover that he knows nothing about wild flowers, nothing about ploughed fields. He will be startled by such questions as, “How many sheep will an acre of marsh-land carry all the year round?” and that most bewildering of problems, “In the profit and loss balance-sheet of a fatted bullock what should a farmer charge himself for the straw off his own farm; and what should he pay himself when in the form of manure that straw is put upon his own fields?”

The farmer as an entity or as a problem will begin to exist for him, and the farm labourer as a “problem” perhaps still more than as an entity; and all the problems of the country—of game pre-

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

serving, of wild bird protection, of the introduction of new crops, of the proper form for education, of small holdings, of the amenities of life and scenery, of the question of small houses, of the influence of surface drainage upon trout streams, and of the destinies of the country child—all these things will give to his broad green horizon hundreds of new significances, so that it will teem with a life more complicated in its interworkings than any of which he had before conceived.

These things differ very much in different men, but as a broad general plan the induction of a man into a countryside runs upon these lines, and by these steps he seems to descend further and further into the bowels of the country. He views the country from a distance ; coming into it he studies the means of communication, and makes nodding acquaintance with the men he meets between the hedgerows ; next, crossing the fields by short cuts that he has discovered, passing through little lanes and coppices, or hopping laboriously from ridge to ridge of a ploughed-up footpath, he comes across wild birds, or watches yellow sheep gasping in the washing-troughs ; he hears, pattering like a little shower or rain, the sound of the turnip-flea at its devastations ; he penetrates next into the farms and cottages and makes acquaintance with all sorts of slow, browned creatures of his own species. Then he will begin, to the measure of the light vouchsafed him, to speculate upon how the lots of these men may be ameliorated,

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

and, after he has speculated as long as time is granted to him, after he has essayed his own seedings and garnered his own crops, he will die, and his "things" will be sold, another pressing to occupy his accustomed place. It is then, under these main headings, with a hope of attaining to such a gradual deepening of interest, that I have undertaken this projection of the rustic cosmogony as it presents itself to me.

Speaking very broadly—and to a writer of generalisations a very great latitude of speech may be allowed—this "Country" in inverted commas, this peculiar Island of the Blest may be said to exist only for a more or less lettered, more or less educated, more or less easily circumstanced town class. Owing to the social convention of land-holding the most easily circumstanced of our body politic belong to the landed class, and such attractions as the green earth possesses for them is very much part of their daily life. They are born among green fields; they went bird's-nesting, they rode their ponies over spring wheat, they were, however artificially, part of the landscape itself. For them, the associations of the country will be the associations of youth and of high spirits, accidental matters personal to themselves. The peculiar decorative line of a pollard-willow-tree will appeal to them in after-life, not because willow-trees were things of which their youth was starved, but because in the small hole of the pollard top of one particular willow-tree they used, say, to leave small packets of chocolates for a particular keeper's

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

daughter, or because in another hole of another tree they made, in company with a good-humoured red-haired boy, their first gunpowder mine. Thus in after years willow-trees will have romantic associations for them as they sit over the table full of correspondence of a room in the Foreign Office.

And the poorer town classes do not, as a rule, regard the country as a place in which they shall regain health, or as a place of glamorous associations; for, on the one hand, their purses, their whole arrangement of a yearly budget will not allow them to contemplate as part of the year's programme a definite month in a farmhouse or beside the sea. And as a general rule, if the industrial or shop assistant townsman began life in the country, his particular beginning of life was neither romantic nor glamorous. He felt himself too near the earth, he was too conscious of the social obligation to touch his hat to people in more shining raiment, while he himself was ungraciously clad, as a rule insufficiently fed, and almost invariably miserably lacking in the more poignant interests of life.

For it is undoubtedly one of the great defects of life in the country that really contagious occupations for the leisure times of any one not a child are wanting, and the hobbledehoy must pass his unoccupied moments in long, aching hours at the corners of village streets. Up to a certain age there are many pleasures to be had; bird's-nesting, with its peering into cracks and crannies of old masonry and

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

into the mysterious half-lights and distances of thorn bushes, offers at once a sport and a collector's hobby ; whilst to the ordinary seasonal games, to the marbles, tip-cat, hoop-driving and leg-wicket of the town child, the country child can add the slightly perilous delights of trout-tickling, tree-climbing, and the robbing of apple orchards.

Thus upon the whole the child of whatever degree does prefer a real country life to the life of the streets. He does not, of course, attach romantic values to natural objects, but he finds in them enough of interest to "keep him going," to tide him over the periods of terrible monotony that fall upon the lives of all children. I have questioned and closely observed a number of children who had the opportunities of an amphibious existence, who had practically only to ask to be allowed to go either from town to country or from country to town. Once the pleasures of gazing into shop windows had been exhausted for the year—and this passion is as natural in children as is that for marbles and bull's-eye lanthorns—once this passion had been exhausted for the year, the children invariably preferred to be in the country ; they loved it for the freedom to be out-of-doors roughly dressed, for the roads that they can run across without being confined to the rigidly straight line of destination ; and they loved it above all for its profusion.

To the real slum child, the child brought up in a grey atmosphere, the sole window into any sort of

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

delight is an infinitesimal copper coin ; without an unattainable number of half-pennies this child can never really handle any number of any kind of objects ; and only those who can remember their own childhood can realise what that means. For in stone-paved courts and asphalted streets there are not even little stones to be picked up ; there is nothing to be made believe with, and sharp-eyed rag-pickers seize upon even the old tins that with a bit of string a child might turn into a representation of a railway train. So that almost the only things that the slum child sees in any numbers are trouser buttons that he gets from Heaven knows where, by Heaven knows what process of gambling. The only other profusion which he ever sees is sealed from him by glass windows or barred to him by the invisible barrier of Property that erects itself even before the greengrocer's stalls on the pavements.

So that, set down in front of the tremendous waste of plant life, the ownerless blades of grass, the enormous spread of fields, the scampering profusion of wild rabbits, or the innumerable and uncontrolled sheep, the slum child, the poor town child is rendered absolutely breathless. He is for the time being like a lifelong prisoner to whom has been given the key of an unneeded street.

I came last hopping season upon a London child raptly contemplating a little brook that ran close to the golden straw wigwam in which her mother was cooking bacon over a chip fire. They had arrived only

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

that afternoon, and their untidy bundles of sackcloth gave a dilapidated look even to a very radiant corner of a valley. The child, in a misty black skirt that did not close at the back and wearing a battered sailor-hat below which her curls hung limply, turned a sharp little face suddenly to me and remarked, as if it were a profound truth that had shaken her whole world—

“There don’t appear to be no turncocks here! And there’s more water than when the main burst opposite Mrs. Taylor’s.” The nut-trees arched over her head and, standing rubbing one foot upon the instep of the other, she pulled a leaf that she let drop into the water. It appeared to bring into her mind another profound and wonderful truth—the fact that here, in an every-day world, was a region in which there were almost no “coppers” to cut and run from. She had “often heered tell of the country,” she said.

I was never able to trace what further mental revolutions took place in her, for almost immediately afterwards typhoid fever broke out in that kraal of hoppers and it grew expedient to avoid their corner of the long sunny hop valley; but that “note” of the country has been the dominant one for any slum child with whom I have ever spoken, and if, sooner or later, the “copper” does become manifest vaguely, and laws of property, even in hazel twigs, do finally assert themselves, profusion remains for most of the poorer townsmen the master “note.” I

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

drove yesterday nine or ten miles along a hog's-back ridge to a cricket match in company with a railway porter who was just one of those slum children grown up. He had entered the service of the railway in a London suburban station (he had been born in one of the worst rookeries in Hammersmith), and he had to be "shifted" on account of his health to one of the smallest of wayside stations. Here for several years he led a curious existence, in, but not of, the country, passing his daylight hours in the station, but having his home in the nearest large town—one of those towns which are practically slices of London arranged along the face of the sea.

We drove for some time down the valley, broad, vividly green and tumultuous with thorn bushes in flower. The railway man talked of the morning's frost which had filled all that bottom land. "Warm the night was in H——," he said; "but when I came out here first train—cor——" he paused. "White——" He paused again, seeking for a simile, but finding none he repeated, "All white." The rest of the eleven who came from up the hill had nothing to say. "Farmers say in the papers that there hasn't been no such frost since '92. Bad for the station-master's 'taters,' I hear. Fruit too. Say, Jimmy, what does frost do to French beans?" "Kills 'em, reckon," a farmer muttered.

So the Cockney went on repeating "Cor!" and "White! You should 'a' seen!" and gaining horticultural information with a swiftness of speech and

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

intentness that compared with the taciturn acceptance of nature by the farmers as the eagerness of a terrier before a rat-hole compares with the stoicism of a great dane. We jogged between the hedgerows till, just as the road began to mount, the fisherman who was driving the waggonette pulled the pipe out of his mouth, and remarked that he was born in Martello Tower No. 42 in the year '57. The Cockney suddenly burst on us with—

“I hear we sh’ll see views from the top of this hill!” The farmers said, “Ay, views! The finest views in England.” Their voices were phlegmatic and nonchalant by comparison, as if they had a local pride in the view, but carried the enthusiasm no further than that. But the Cockney said again, “Views! I’ve often wanted to see them views. I’ve often thought of walking up the hill to see them views.” And he repeated with an interminable variety of accentuation the fact that he had often thought of “them views.”

We reached the top of the hill, and from far below the crepitation of a train met his ear. He pulled out his watch, exclaimed, “The 1.27 not more’n ten minutes late,” then turned and caught the trail of smoke that appeared like a plume being blown swiftly across immensity. It was as if the whole of the world opened out to him between the gaps of the hedgerows. There were plains, woods, fields like pieces of a pattern, two glimpses of sea between shoulders of purple hill, innumerable churches,

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

innumerable villages, all the foreground an immense valley, bright with vivid sunlight, dotted with white thorn trees, like solid and soft substances moulded by careless fingers, casting shadows vivid and sparkling, and all the background fading into those almost incredible mysteries of haze that give to our distances so pathetic and so romantic a beauty, that so wonderfully allure the eye to travel deeper and deeper, or to rest itself in shades always more and more soft.

As he turned his head to speak his words were stopped by the other broader view that swept up to the horizon on the northern side of the ridge. Here there were fields smaller, hillocks more abrupt, and always more and more and more woodlands of every shadow and shade of colour, until at last the whole surface was like an unbroken carpet, a purple lawn with swelling cushions to the indistinguishable distances.

We drove for many miles between these two views, always along that upland hog's-back. I do not know just when the railway man delivered himself of *his* profound truth, but it was, "Cor! What a lot a fellow could do if he had all *that!*"

The farmers uttered deep "Ahs," not in reference to his sentiment, but in the fashion of proprietors, as if before his eyes and to impress him they had unrolled that tremendous panorama which I believe hardly two of them had twice before seen; for the real countryman travels very little beyond his own valley, and except for the road to the nearest market towns is little of a guide in his country.

THE COUNTRY OF THE TOWNSMAN

And, as I stood fielding through a long and sleepy afternoon, in a rough outfield whose grass was above the ankles, over a shoulder of hill below which was spread just such another panorama, it ran through my head: "What a lot a fellow *could* do if he owned all that!"

What sermons he could preach in the primeval church whose weathercock flashed sudden scintillations through miles of space; how, with the love of his heart, he might for ever hide himself in one of the white thatched cottages that fit into their hidden valleys as children's toys fit into their boxes; what straight and joyous blows his axe might deliver through the saplings of those shaves and coppices (and surely in all life there is no sensation more satisfying than that of a truly delivered, truly swung axe-stroke as it sinks into and through a young tree as thick as your leg!); or what Utopias he might, a benevolent despot, set up somewhere on hill or dale, between the grass that gives him foothold and the last hill that his eye can reach!

These thoughts are no doubt anthropomorphic, but I think that they are inherent in poor humanity, to whom the high places of the green earth seem for a time to communicate a feeling of having the height of a giant and the powers of a godhead. In one of the infinite variations to which human thought lends itself this feeling of oversight, of control over one's own destiny, or over the destinies of an immense number—whether of human beings or

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

of blades of grass—some species of supernatural endowment is the “note” of the promise that the country makes to us, whether in the rushings of its winds, in the tumultuous lines of the parti-coloured mantle thrown down all across its surface, or in the mighty chorus with which, from dark flanks of a wooded hill, the birds sing down the sun in May.

In some subtle and mysterious way the country seems to offer us the chance, the mirage of attaining, each one of us, to his ideal. And for that reason each one of us, at the different times of the year when the *malaise* seizes him, itches to set forth in some sort of knapsack, and on horse, a-foot, in swift carriages or in the sheltered sloth of his own veranda, between the hedgerows, across the fields, by the sands of the sea, or through the interstices of his own thoughts whilst his eyes follow sinuous lines of greenery, he will attempt to track down that master-thought of his existence, that mysterious white fawn that lies couched beside some fountain, in some valley, in some Fortunate Island

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS



THE
HEART OF THE COUNTRY

CHAPTER I
BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

ACH road has its own particular individuality, nay more, each has its own moral character, its ethics as it were, since what are ethics and morals but the effects of one's attitude upon the beings who come in contact with us? Roads will soothe us, tire us, exhilarate us, fill us with thoughts or excite our minds with pictures of the whole hosts of history that have passed along them.

Some of us love best the turnpikes—and I love them very well—broad, white, smooth, with generous curves, with carpets of turf along the sides enough to make lawns, with gentle rises and with great skies above them.

How many centurions, how many Roman missionaries, how many sweating bearers of tin ore, how many earls, how many kings, how many royal brides,

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

or how many forsaken women have passed over these still, long stretches ! How many feet have danced gaily along, how many have ached in the dust !

When men go along such a road it is as if they went amid a crowd of invisible phantoms, hearing a continuous rustle of inaudible whispers. Here is the spot where a king drank, at the top of the rise. Here is where the five robbers lay in wait in the coppice. Here is the milestone on which, on a moon-light night, there sat the ghost of a bride whom a peasant woman saw raise a white face to hers. . . .

There are solitary roads that look over the corners of great uplands and seem to be peopled by no ghosts ; only above the not distant barrows or the many-tiered fortifications of grass slopes one imagines that there peep the shaggy touzled heads of the ancient and forgotten inhabitants of the land.

There are roads that climb the sides of hills, aslant, so that from a distance they seem to be white sashes of honour ; and from distances, too, one may see, high on the downs, white fragments of roads, like plumes or like bill-hooks, hanging from the skies. One hardly imagines that one will ever climb them ; if one does so, the road assumes so new an aspect that it loses for the time the identity that it had for us upon the lower steps.

But the essential road of “the country” is one that runs between hedgerows—nay more, the essential first note of “the country” is the hedgerow itself. For, as far as I have been able to discover, the

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

tendency of the town dweller is to circumscribe “the country,” to restrict it within comparatively narrow limits. Thus, to go out of Town may be to go to the Riviera, to Cape Coast Castle, or to the Broads. But to go to any one of these, to the sea-shore, or to the Yorkshire moors, is not to go into the country. If the townsman were taking a summer holiday at Lynmouth, he would be at the seaside; if from thence he went inland towards Barnstaple, that would be going into the country. But if his course led him Brendon way, he would be going, not into the country, but on to the moor.

Land, in fact, that has any very distinctive features—moors, hills, peaks, downs, marshes or fens—such land is not the country. It is only where the hedgerows journey beside the turnpikes, close in the sunken lanes, or from a height are seen, like the meshes of an ill-made net, to lie lightly upon hills and dales, to parcel off irregular squares of vivid green from jagged rhomboids of brown, of yellow, or of purple—it is only where the hedgerow has its agricultural use that the country of the townsman is. No doubt this is a splitting of philological hairs, but by minutely enquiring into philology one comes upon historic truths; and this hedgerow definition leads us to see that the word indicates not mere land that stretches beneath the free sky—otherwise the country would take in the continent or the habitable globe itself—but it indicated in the old days simply and solely the agricultural land of England, the land

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

that in the slow revolution of the centuries has been agricultural, pastoral, and agricultural again, and now again pastoral. It is a vague stretch of territory, with unknown villages, unknown fields, brooks, plough-lands, smithies, ricks, hop-oasts, tithe-barns, dovecotes, manors—but always the hedgerow shuts in the horizon, so that to go into the country is, as it were, to lose oneself in a maze; whereas to go, say, on to Lobden moorside, is to expose oneself nakedly to the skies.

The hedgerow, indeed, is so much the mark of the country that it conducts a man there from the towns and conducts him once more home again, since, where the quicken hedges of the railways take command of the lines, there the country begins. There are few hedges so beautiful as those that we see flitting past us, green, solid, sinuous, with here and there a touch of blossom and here and there a trimmed peacock. And there are few surfaces pleasanter for the eye to rest upon than their slight mosaic of spiny stem and green leaf.

There are, however, not many such hedges stretched across the countryside, and perhaps in one's every-day mood one may be glad. For a land where all hedges were perfect quicksets would be a land fat and prosperous, but a land slightly soulless. It is true that one has one's other frame of mind, the frame in which one longs for the good piece of work, well executed for the work's sake—the frame of mind in which one prefers a newly-tiled barn to the

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

broadest, most moss-begrown and sparrow and rat-tunnelled thatched surface ; in which a new, white, five-barred gate is as a soothing and beneficent rest for eyes tired and depressed by age-green wattles straddled across the gate gaps of an ill-tenanted homestead.

But before one will have reached to that frame of mind, one will have travelled between many hedgerows riotous with dog-rose, odorous with elder in blossom, along which the nefarious but beloved bramble will carry the delighted eye from briony to briony. And journeying between these hedgerows, the townsman who loves the country will pass through several phases until he arrives at one or the other of the two stages of country thought, until he arrives in one or the other of the two camps that are set over against each other. Loosely put, because the point is one that must come to be elaborated later, these two schools, these two hostile camps are that of the farmer who likes to farm as his fathers did because the life is goodly where farms are gracious, and that of the man who clears away all picturesque lumber because business is business. With both combatants a really proper man will find himself at one time or the other in sympathy, but the less-thinking of us enlist for good under one banner or the other. And, loosely put again, we may say that the townsman who really "takes up" farming becomes a "business man," whilst the townsman who merely lives in the country because he loves it will groan at each new strand of barbed wire and each new cement pigsty.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

I have walked over many countrysides with many different men—with an American Jesuit, who wanted to see the most beautiful village of my own county “tidied up,” stripped of creepers and of ivy, painted, and lit with electric light; with a tramp, who was lividly indignant because the local Countess had cut down some timber and spoilt a whole stretch of park land; with a lawyer, to whom the first bit of dusty fallow with barbed wire round it was already Arcadia; with sailors ashore, who wanted to see always more barns and more barns round the homesteads, to indicate endless profusion; with a peasant poet in a smock frock and with aged, faded blue eyes, who declared that God did not love steam-ploughs; as well as with a steam-plough and traction-engine proprietor, who declared that his great hulks of iron, standing, like enormous toys dragged by some god-head, askew upon the hillside, dragging from side to side across the furrows giant insects all of iron—his devouring monsters were sending up those pillars of smoke that should lead the Chosen People back to the Land. But always, subconsciously enough, they divided themselves into these two strains—they wanted hedge-rows because they sheltered birds, yielded flowers, or had existed in the days of their fathers; or they wanted iron fences and barbed wire because these give no shade upon the crops, harbour neither birds nor insects, and indicate that the right type of man, the economist, is in charge of land that shall be rejuvenated.

My tramp, with his rain-beaten clothes, his jovial,

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

peak-bearded face, his luxurious sprawl along the roadside, like a Roman Emperor on his couch at a long table—my tramp was probably the most disinterested, or the most interested, of them all. Tramps are, after all, first to be considered as users of the highways or the hidden lanes, since they, along with sparrows, weasels, traveller's-joy and young lovers, really live their lives between the hedgerows. The gipsy, with his caravan or his withy-supported wigwam, is by comparison an indoor dweller. The individualities of these travellers are infinite, but the good tramp, the real thing of his kind, is precisely the one who lies by the highway, banqueting with his eyes. He is the artist—the man who loves the road for its own sake: he has not any other ambitions than shade from the sun, long grass, and eternal autumn weather.

It puzzled me for many years to know what castles in Spain a tramp built—what was *his* particular Island of the Blest; and after getting over the first shyness of accosting these slightly repellent bundles of clothes (for it is, after all, the clothes that repel us), I pursued this ideal with some diligence. It was Carew, the tramp of whom I have spoken, who got me most easily over my shyness. He was a man of no particular book-learning, though he said that hardly a day passed without his picking up a paper. He was the son of a Guardsman and a prostitute, and his professional tale had it that he had been bred up as a tooth-comb maker;

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

machines had destroyed *that* occupation. He carried a comb in his pocket; but I fancy that he delighted to comb his long golden beard, and had the comb for that purpose, inventing the profession to fit the implement. I have met him in Regent's Park, on the Sussex Downs, in Cornwall, and in the Strand; but he always carried his boots under his arm—I never knew quite why. I fancy it was on account of some superstition: he did not like boots, but a sort of luck, I imagine, clung to this particular pair. An odd mixture of sardonic candour and savage reticence, he would admit to having been in every gaol in the South of England, but he would never reveal what he was afraid of on the roads at night. He always crept into the shelter of some house at nightfall, and he had once, he told me, been arrested for following a young lady five miles across Salisbury Plain in the moonlight—with no other evil purpose than the desire to keep a human being in sight.

In spite of the comb, he said he had never done a day's work in his life, and never meant to. He lay by the roadside, and sometimes he had been so magnificently lazy that he had gone without food for two days rather than beg. "You get sick of people's faces at times," he said.

But Carew, as far as I can discover, built no castles in Spain. He supposed that pneumonia would carry him off one of these days, probably in China, as he styled Lewes gaol. He called the various prisons by the names of countries, and nick-

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

named workhouses after the great cities of the world. Thus Eachend Hill Union was Paris with him, and Bodmin, Rome; though this caused confusion, because, of course, London itself is Rome in the lingo of the hedgerows. His crimes, as far as I know, were limited to sleeping out; in this flagrant offence he was very frequently taken because of the nervous tendency which made him sleep in stack-yards near cattle, or in farm stables near horses, for the sake of company. He exhibited with pride a small sheaf of newspaper cuttings which recorded his convictions, and his insolent retorts to magistrates. He was delighted with these; but he seemed to have no further ambitions. He was as contented with a "bob" as with a "quid" if I gave it him, and apparently contented with a "brown." He let life roll by in front of him, and took from it as little as he gave.

If you stay for any time at an inn looking down on one of the great tramp highways, you will see the same faces, the same clothes, the same battered hats, the same splay feet, pass and repass your window at intervals of a day or two; for many of these tramps, having found a string of two or three comfortable wards, will spend, like summer ghosts, the whole of the warm season haunting the same countryside. Congenital lack of candour, the desire to please their interlocutor, sheer muzziness of brain, or sheer ferocity, make it difficult to discover what may be the ideal of this brown flotsam. Their universal and official shibboleth has it that if they could only get a

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

steady job and a nice little cottage they would settle down with the missus and kids and live respectable under the parson for evermore. The more candid of the men, when they were assured that their reply would make no difference in the number of coppers destined for them, confessed almost without exception that their ideal was to have a pension like a soldier. This appeared to be, as it were, the good establishment that every middle-class man wishes for his daughter. As a matter of fact, a very considerable percentage of the innumerable old soldiers who solicit alms along the road do have such pensions, and for perhaps three glorious nights out of the month are kings of the earth—kings over draggled and carneying subjects, as aware as their monarch himself of when pay-day comes round, and where the floodgates of oblivion will be let loose.

One very hot day last month, on a high-road broad and parched, stretching out level and without end beneath an empty sky, on a day so hot that the very larks were silent, and the twittering duologue of the linnets sounded as if it came from dusty little throats, I sat down in the long grass under the hedge by the side of a very inviting and swarthy tramp. He suddenly brought out in a rich soft voice, without any inquiry of mine—

“Lord ! I’d like to be a workhouse master. By — I’d like to be the master of a workhouse ! Wouldn’t I give the casuals champagne and porter-house steaks one day, and wouldn’t I wollup them the next !”

A little time before I had walked along the same road in a drenching rain with a German tramp, tiny, wizened, ferret-faced, and with the extravagant gestures of an actor. With his right hand he held firmly to my sleeve, and from a great scroll of manuscript in his left he read passages from a poem about the beauties of nature abounding in the forest near the town of Carlsruhe in Baden. His whole being was engrossed in his work, he saw neither road, sky, nor sea; only from time to time he broke off to exclaim, "This is very pleasant, you will like this very much!" His life-history, varied and unromantic as it was, would occupy too much space in the telling, but *his* consoling thought was that Wagner had been too poor to possess an overcoat whilst he was writing his music drama of *Rienzi*; and hope, ardour, confidence and romance were in his eyes and voice when, at saying farewell to me, he uttered the words:—"There is a Russian author, I forget his name, who has just bought an estate on the Volga for 700,000 marks; once he was only a tramp like me." He was quite illiterate and his poem was atrocious, but he said that people on the road were very kind to him; one gentleman at Brighton had given him board and lodging for three nights.

Thus between the fragrant hedgerows the townsman newly come into his heart of the country will see this vast body of dun-coloured units driven backwards and forwards like ghosts upon the tides of the winds. For him, indeed, they must remain ghosts;

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

as a rule he will feel the repulsion that we must all feel for those who are outside our world, outside our life, outside our praise, outside our banning or our cursing.

They are as much outside pity or regret as are the innumerable dead; they have gone back into the heart of the country and have become one with the ravens, the crows, the weasels, and the robins, picking up the things that we have no use for, from such small parcels of ground as we have not enclosed.

To the really inveterate townsman every weather-beaten man or woman that he passes along the road is a tramp. It is as difficult for him to distinguish a genuine waggoner from a fraudulent tooth-comb maker as to tell rye grass from permanent pasture, or the mistle from the song-thrush. But gradually as he sinks deeper into the life of the country, passes during weeks and months between hedgerows and begins to note differences between the songs of birds, he will acquire a sort of instinctive knack of distinguishing between one sort and the other. The differences lie in minute things, in the poise of the head, the way of setting down the foot, the glance of the eye in passing. The townsman may make experiments in reclaiming the tramp—like Hercules he will wrestle with death for possession of one soul—but once the man is really dead there is no recalling him. He may set him up and endow him with tools, clothes, a place to live in and all the fair simulacra of

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

our corporate life ; he may keep him propped up for a day, for a week, for a month, for a year, but sooner or later the body will collapse and the soul once more be at one with the Maker of the hedgerow. To try preventing the real tramp from following out his life is like attempting to stifle the words of a poet or the sighs of a miserable lover. But if he ever come to examine meticulously, the townsman will discover that amongst these ghosts there whirl past some that still cling to life, that claim our pity and need such helping hands as the gods will let us give. Once, when I lived on a hillside below a common, I came home in the evening down through the furze and saw a faded old man and a faded old woman, with the usual perambulator of the traveller, encamped in a small sandpit. They were both painfully clean, and beneath an arbour of gorse bushes had an odd air of being Philemon and Baucis cast upon an unsympathetic world, where the very twilight of the gods had passed away. But what struck me most and most disagreeably was to see my own favourite yellow Orpington cock dancing up and down in front of the old man full a quarter-of-a-mile away from my gate. I imagined that he was one of those people who can whisper poultry out of a field, just as gipsies are said to do with stallions. But on reaching home I saw my cock contentedly dusting himself in an ash-heap, and when I went a couple of hours later to the post, passing the old people's settlement, I saw that the yellow cock had been reinforced by a gigantic

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

lop-eared rabbit, an aged tortoise-shell cat and a battered accordion. These were the Lares and Penates of this ancient couple, the signs that, evil days having fallen upon them and the hatred of the workhouse having forced them to take the road, they still clung desperately to as much as they could carry in a perambulator of their former householder's dignity ; they still clung desperately to life, the old man still hoping for fruit trees to prune, the old woman still cherishing her ideal of many beehives to look after.

Such cases as this—of people whom it would be possible to help—are, of course, innumerable, perhaps less to be numbered between the hedgerows and across the fields than even in the towns ; for so slender in the country is the margin between keeping on going and folding one's hands that the real wonder is not that the poor are always with us. The high-road at one bend or another, or climbing to the skyline, will inevitably take our townsman past a great and gaunt building—the inevitable last earthly home of how many!—and the sight of aged forms in a uniform brown, sitting as if they were part of the patterns of a dado along the bottom of the tall blank wall, must almost as inevitably give our traveller pause. Here are more of the dead, more men outside the world, withdrawn into a mysterious state which is neither work nor leisure, neither rest nor anything but merely waiting ; and waiting for what ? I have often wondered what castles in the air

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

these particular poor mortals could find it in them to build ; perhaps the territory upon which these edifices are to arise will only be found on the other side of the last stream of all. I have never had the heart to enquire. But perhaps the real speculation in most of their minds is as to how many currants will be contained in the piece of “spotted dick” that will form their Sabbath pudding.

When I think of all the remarkable men I have known who have finished their careers in these last resting-places and of all the august women, I am filled for the moment with a sense of my own extravagant unworthiness or with a fear for my own future. The country, I think, breeds individualities stronger, more vigorous, precisely more remarkable than are bred in those stretches of territory where the cotton shuttles fly in millions or trains burrow under the ground. Or perhaps it is only I who have been fortunate enough to come into contact with no man true to type and no women who have not achieved much or suffered greatly. I think, for instance, of Ned Post, a wizened, blear-eyed, boastful, melodramatic old ruffian, who was the last of a family of great mole catchers—a man with an inherited gift in its line as great as that of Bach’s. I think of Swaffer, who had year after year taken prizes as the best ploughman of his country, who had crossed the Atlantic in the sixties to take the prize as the best ploughman in the State of Pennsylvania. I think of old Mark Swain, who founded a poetic and remarkable religion of his

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

own ; and I think of old Mrs. Sylvester, who had for thirty years kept going a small four-acre holding, out of which she supported a bedridden husband and two dissolute sons. And all these remarkable people died in the same workhouse in the same winter week. These things, of course, cannot be helped ; and perhaps it is merely the touch of genius, or of that immense patience which is so good a substitute for genius, which each of these people possessed ; perhaps it was only that indefinable touch in men that, making them care more for their work than for its profits, dropped them down those steps of this world which have only one lowest stage.

But it has often occurred to me to wonder how their particular villages, hamlets or homesteads get on without them. For sooner or later the townsman in the country will discover how delicately balanced is the human economy of the village even in these days of distributed resources. In each community there is, as a rule, only one of a trade, and, if that one drop out, go into the Union, or, what is worst, if he become incensed against our particular townsman, the result will be hindrances most disastrous, most disturbing for the customer's daily life.

Turning out of the byways and lanes that run from each of the villages round a market centre, there will come hooded vehicles drawn by old and gaunt horses. On the big roads these will seem to our townsman quaint or merely negligible. But each will be driven by an autocrat, grim, jovial, loquacious or saturnine —an autocrat having indispensably that gift which

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

is said to be inborn among the dwellers on thrones, the gift of memory. Before the gate of each cottage on the way to market the cart will draw up, and from the doors will issue suppliant women with their petitions, to which, all being well, the tyrant will give his gracious assent.

The image is by no means so very far-fetched, for should the carrier, as the phrase is, "get his knife into" any particular household upon his route, he can cause its inhabitants nearly as much personal inconvenience as any form of bad government. And the results are almost as far-spreading if he fall ill or die. I lived at one time in a farmhouse some ten miles from a cathedral and market city, and the stackyard was used by a carrier whose tattered old vans and dilapidated horses, with ankles fringed like those of a Cochin China fowl, occupied the tumbled-down barns and leaking sheds. It gave one a very good opportunity of studying means of communications in the backwaters of the very heart of the country. And indeed the carrier's route to D— was an artery.

Towards eight o'clock of a morning there was a sort of informal gathering in our yard. Children came with notes from outlying farms; the baker brought empty sacks, women patterns to be matched; the clergyman's wife her books to be changed at the circulating library; gamekeepers came from afar with rabbits by the hundred slung before and behind them like fur garments. The dismal and dingy old

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

cushions were fitted on to the seats, and up a shaky ladder climbed the market women in their best clothes, with great baskets on their arms, ready for the three-hours' drive, with their feet on the dead rabbits, stifling in the smell of paraffin, of sugar, of stable hartshorn, of road dust and of humanity. Slowly jolting out of the yard, so that all the heads jerked one way and all back together, beneath the great elms and down towards the highway the swaying caravan set forth, with the tongues already going.

No man of the world of towns would believe what those tongues utter; to listen is to have the pleasant country rides converted into something blighted. In the thatched cottages there dwell covetousness, drink, theft, incest—Heaven knows what! In the great farm-houses there are covetousness, drink, theft, land-grabbing, sheep-stealing, swindling of the illiterate—God knows what! And Heaven knows what of truth there may dwell beneath the cloud of witness that goes up from that swaying machine with the drooping horse and drooping whip-lash. That something of truth is there we may well concede; the carrier's cart hides amongst its other microbes no microbe of imagination or substantial invention. I am inclined to believe that almost every “scandal” that one hears in the carrier's cart is true to fact, and only as to motive exaggerated. What is wanted is the remembrance that poor humanity is poor humanity, that there are in the world pitfalls, gins,

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

temptations—works of the devil, as they had it in the old days.

And the townsman between the hedgerows must remember that the countryman has a prodigiously long memory. There was a farmer I knew well, an aged, apple-cheeked, hook-nosed, blue-eyed creature, with just a suggestion of frailness to add charm to his personality and to the fringe of white hair that fell below his old weather-green hat. He had not as far as one could tell a vice. He was popular with his hands, all of whom he had retained for many years; he was cheerfully obeyed by his sons; he was up every morning at daybreak, and he brewed his own ale. One day he had a stroke, and there was an end of his activities.

“Well, and that’s a judgment on old F——!” a peasant woman said to me. F—— was then seventy-two. At the age of eighteen he had committed some fault—no doubt with a girl, but I have forgotten. So the paralysis was a judgment on him for *that*. The countryside could not set any other sin to his account; but it had a memory casting back over the half of a century. Assuredly it is not here, but rather in the streets of the towns, that there grows the Herb Oblivion.

And inasmuch as there is not one of us without his secret that under the searching eyes and ever-waiting ears of small communities eventually comes to be disclosed—inasmuch as there is no man without covetousness, hardness of heart, intemper-

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

ance, or whatever may be the seven deadly sins, the catalogue of remembered crimes will seem to fall like a blight across the bright countryside and for a time at least dim its greenness for our townsman. But gradually the problem will readjust itself, and that particular aspect over the hedgerows will become, as it is to the carrier himself, part of the day's journey.

Arrived at his market-town, that autocrat will stable his horse at the "Leg of Mutton"; will leave his cart in the inn-yard for parcels to be thrown into it, and will set about ordering chicken-meal, butcher's meat, No. 50 cottons, paraffin casks, volumes of poems, bedding-out plants, branding-irons and sheep-bells. And towards nightfall in summer, or long after dark in the winter, my friend Grant would be once more in the yard—with a pleasant smell of hot dust, or a romantic gleam of lamps under the great thatched eaves of the barns—and we should fall upon him for our joints, our weekly papers, our candles, and our bodily food, our physical and spiritual illuminants.

One evening a wild, prolonged and incomprehensible drumming penetrated into our house; it brought all the white aprons of the village to the doors, and finally to the banks of our small stream. In a turmoil of foam, its neck wildly elevated, its eyes starting, its hoofs kicking up the very pebbles from the bottom of the brook, the carrier's horse lay, pinned down into the water beneath the van itself. Left alone for a minute whilst the carrier was

taking lemonade in our kitchen—the day was terribly hot—the horse had wandered to drink at its accustomed spot; the van, tilting over upon the bank, had done the rest.

The result was desolation in the village and in many outlying homesteads. To be left with one's three-days' provisions at the bottom of the brook is, in places where shops are ten miles apart, as much of a hardship as would be entailed, say, by having for that space of time the bailiffs in the house for rates. And what more can a tyrant do than that? The whole current of one's domestic life—a thing with which, in the country, one's peace of mind is very much bound up—is disturbed and rendered distressing. One is forced to ask all sorts of favours, and to stand cap in hand before peasants whose rigidity of soul one discovers, enhanced by one's own physical emptiness. Mr. Cary, the sexton, may have a fowl or two to spare, and Mrs. Hood certainly has carrots. The point is whether Cary, who has never—one remembers at this instant—touched his hat or received twopence from us, can be brought by softness of voice or praise of his walking-stick to part with one of his chickens; and how in the world is one to soften the heart of Mrs. Hood, who married a gentleman's coachman, and has in consequence a rigid back and a great personal dignity?

Such treatment of the subject may appear humorous, but it is sober enough when one needs must undergo these humiliations. It is customary to

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

regard the rustic as servile in his habits and his mind; but one of the first things that the townsman journeying between the hedgerows will discover is how very little he counts, how very little he is "placed" amongst the real peasants. His clothes, his air of command, his glance of the eye, will secure for him in the towns ready touchings of the cap and profuse "Sirs" spicing the speech of inferiors. And as long as he keeps to the railway stations and inns of the country he will as likely as not receive the same courtesies. But once between the hedgerows, he will be conscious of a struggle. He may be, our townsman, eminent in the tea or upholstery trade, in the world of letters or of horse-breeding; it is all one to the peasant. The other day, in my own village, I heard a wealthy lady lamenting that the little girls did not curtsey to her: she had been in the place six months. Yet I know residents who for many years have paid their way, who in the outer world are celebrated, who occupy fine houses and dress simply but well—who, in short, are "good" people—and the only man who touches his cap to them is the policeman. The townsman, in fact, will be struck at first by the sense of being appallingly alone and unplaced so far as his inferiors go. He may be "called on," may drive in a carriage and pair, and may distribute blankets and brandy; but the backs of the hedgers will remain obstinately towards him when he passes, and sheep-shearers will keep their eyes down upon the fleeces falling between their

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

legs. It will be impossible to engage in conversation with the better farm hands. Respect may be purchased from some sort of men in stained corduroys, at hedge-alehouses, for pints of beer ; but the men and women who have a stake in the village, who are "old-standers," will remain for long years wonderfully stiff in the back and arms. And the stages by which recognition will come will be curious and definite. The hat-touching test is, after all, the most convenient standard, and, looked into carefully, after allowance has been made for differences in different localities, the process will be much as follows. After six months or a year in the heart of the country the townsman will find himself invited to become, say, vice-president of a quoits club ; he will find himself at the club dinner the neighbour of the jobbing gardener of the village and of the permanent road-mender. He will offer them cigarettes at the end of the meal. After that, perfunctorily and when no one is looking, these two will touch their caps to him. But in the publicity of the village street, or if they happen to be walking with other men, they will still turn away their heads, or look with a stony and unrecognising gaze.

The countryman is, in fact, extremely loth to come to subjection ; something does force him to acknowledge the existence of the Quality, something indefinite that he obeys involuntarily and with dislike ; and he is more than loth to pay cap-service to any newcomer, since he aspires always to shake off

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

the yoke. The touch of the cap in secret places is due perhaps as much to shyness as to anything else—an involuntary action of muscles that know nothing else to do. Backed up by other men, however, and unwilling to let the others know that he has come to heel at all, the countryman will face the matter out with as brave a heart as he can. So that at a certain stage the townsman in a winter dusk may pass six men going home from work together, and every one of them may be personally known to him, yet not one of them in his dun-coloured clothes, with his rush basket over his back, will move an eyelid in recognition. But, after many years of paying his way and of being got used to, for no earthly reason and at no given signal, passing the corner of the churchyard on a Sunday evening, when all men conscious of their best clothes are at their stiffest and least amenable, the townsman will find himself greeted by a whole chorus of "Fine evenings!" Then indeed he has received his accolade and has found his place and welcome home.

It is almost necessary to write of the return to the land thus from the standpoint of the comparatively well-to-do. For the poor and the working classes of the towns never really go back. One in five hundred may be attracted by a "good job," but perhaps not one in a hundred goes seeking, however unconsciously, a country spirit. As a rule, town life weakens the fibres of the muscles, more particularly the muscles of the leg, so that a dock labourer how-

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

ever robust is apt to break down hopelessly when put to a job of hay-making. I knew, indeed, one very fine figure of a Covent Garden porter. He had a face that, seen under a high tier of fruit baskets, appeared like a sun trying to burst out from under a pillar of fog, and, at the side of the Opera, he could run backwards and forwards across the pavement from dawn to noon without perspiring. Some odd whim sent him down, in his own words, "to see where things bloomin' well growed," and he took kindly and good-humouredly to a piece of charlock weeding in an immense wheatfield, in which even his considerable bulk was as the tiniest of specks in a whole downside of mustard-yellow. He liked the work very well; but ten days sent him into the infirmary, and, after going on tramp for a month or so, doing a hand's turn here and there, he returned to the piazza and work that he could do. He was the only really competent London workman that I have come across between the hedgerows, and except for the fact that beneath a Wiltshire sun you could get such a thirst that even somebody's blooming patent lemonade tasted good—except for that, I extracted from him no sign of any mental revelation that had come to him in the silent places of the great hills. He had had the patent lemonade served out to him amongst the other haymakers of a temperance farmer, and the fact that it was poured out of beer jars gave a touch of savage and rueful indignation to his voice.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

He, as I have said, was a really competent man, in the sense that he had work in a town and could do it efficiently. But most of the rural immigrants that I have met have been men, for one reason or another, disqualified or disabled. Thus I have found employed or seeking employment a trick diver and swimming master, whose eyes had failed owing to the pressure of water beneath the surface, a Drury Lane super who had lost his voice, a metropolitan policeman who had been treated once too often by a publican, and several city clerks whose health had failed. But, as far as my own observation goes, I should say that good men in good work never do go back to the land. How should they indeed?

Towards Michaelmas or near Lady-Day—in any of the seasons of the quarters—you will see beneath the highway elms or over the white roads of the downs, crossing bridges, at elbow-like little angles of sunken lanes, tall waggons covered with tarpaulins that bulge in ways that the eye, accustomed to the rounded lumps of corn sacks or of bales of wool, must needs deem barbarous and strange, with the inverted leg of a chair sticking out of a fold or the handle of a saucepan through an eyelet hole of the tarpaulin—you will see high-poled waggons ponderously blocking the road, creeping onward with a great gravity as if in pensive thought. Perched on the shafts will be a child with a cat in her arms, and hanging to one of the side-boards a wicker cage, through whose interstices there dazzle the

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

orange bill and coaly feathers of a blackbird. Here is the countryman on the move—a whole family, a whole unit of the human race in suspension betwixt failure and new hope, betwixt the worse and the better or the worse and the worse. Suddenly the farm waggon, from being the dull transporter of dusty bags and fat sheep covered in with nets, is transformed into a ponderous machine of fate; suddenly a family, fixed and immovable, tied down to the ground with all the weights of impedimenta as a balloon is tethered by heavy bags of sand—suddenly this family has become nomadic. Its tables are woefully inverted beneath the sky; its memorial cards, these milestones of life that are the most precious decorations of all cottage walls, are packed away in some obscure corner of the creaking car.

But just because these flittings are so ponderous and so slow, they are very costly. I have seen blue farm-carts with red wheels in the courtyard of the British Museum, and only yesterday in the New Road a cart with the inscription, *So and So : Carrier, Crowborough, Frant and Tunbridge Wells to the Spur Inn, Borough High Street*, was loading up the furniture of a tinsmith who was migrating to the town of the Pantiles. But this flit would cost five pounds: the tinsmith had come into money and had bought a little business of his own. He was not in any case going into the country, but pursuing a fragment of London across the Weald of Kent. How then, lacking State-subsidised pantechnicons or something

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

of the sort, or municipal moving loans or something of the sort, is the town mechanic without legacy or windfall to transport his goods, his wife, his children or himself back to the land? The people moving from the austere Government building were of course seeking the idyllic; but they too no doubt had some means, and could possibly work as well in their cottage as in Bloomsbury. They did not at least pass from a big wage to a low, and incur a great expense at a time of transition when there is inevitably least in the purse. The town mechanic might indeed be willing to move into the country, but how is he to get there?

It is difficult enough for the countryman to "move" sometimes. In a remote down-land district there was a farmer I knew rather well who was noted for keeping his hands for very long periods. He was envied, moreover, because he managed to pay them less than any farmer of those parts. He still paid on the scale of the now nearly obsolete great hundred—six score instead of five—for any piecework, a once universal custom that education of the farm hands has nearly killed in the land. On one of his down roads I once met a waggoner I knew. The man was notoriously good with horses, steady, sober, and ready to sit up all night for a week with a sick mare. Now his whip drooped, his feet dragged in the cart ruts—and he was sobbing.

It was because he simply could not get away from his master. It was a physical impossibility. Other

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

farmers were ready to take him—but he could not “move.” He had six children; he earned fourteen shillings a week. How in the world was he to get away? He could not save; his master jeered at the idea of advancing him money to move with, or of lending him a waggon. There he was—there, it seemed, he must simply remain. And this, I discovered, was the secret of my friend keeping his hands so long. Taxed with it, he merely chuckled. He had selected all his men for their large families; he lent them his waggons to move in with over the heart-breaking downland roads. And they never got away.

This, naturally, is an extreme case; but I seldom meet a Michaelmas move without thinking of that successful farmer’s chuckle. They never get away. And it is much the same with the labourers in the great towns of the South.

In parts of the North it is different. Round about Middlesborough, for instance, you may judge fairly well of the state of farming by the attendance on the second day of the annual statute fairs. If things are well with the country, the farmer can offer attractive terms to the extra hands that it is always the farmer’s first luxury to indulge in, and the men are ready to be hired. But if the terms are not sufficiently good, the farm hand will simply go back to the furnaces—for a year, for two, or for three, and, iron work being heavy, the muscles do not deteriorate as in so many other trades. Thus in these particular parts there is a constant flux between slag-heap and moorland.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

But as a general rule town is town, and country country; and it is only in special districts that along the high-roads you will meet with strong-armed men passing from one to the other; and, except for the automobiles, which as yet have done little to change the face of the country, the great roads are singularly deserted. Tramps, carriers, postmen, farm-waggons, farmers' gigs, governess carts, flocks of sheep with their pungent odour, droves of cattle with their piercing and mild eyes, cyclists passing in wisps—all these do not contrive to make a population for highways that were meant to reverberate every quarter of an hour beneath the heavy wheels of stage coaches. (And, indeed, the hard surface which Macadam invented first began to render the horse obsolescent, since no hoof can really stand much fast work upon the iron of our great roads.)

Level, white and engrossed beneath the sky, as if they too had purposes, as if they too sought some sort of lovers' meeting of their own, where they intersect at the journey's end, the great highways run across the green islands.

The small by-roads, the sunken lanes, all the network of little veins that bring, as it were, tributary drops of blood, go off from side to side as if they were the individuals of a marching body dropping out to do sentry duty in hamlets off the line of march. They have about them an air of secrecy, as if between their hedgerows rather than on the great roads we may learn what is at the heart of the country. Upon

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

them the townsman will meet more often little children going upon the tiny errands that make up the home-life of the countryman ; carts will be few, and the tramp will be a rare visitor. But even in the sunken lanes the note of the country road is one of solitude, and if one desires privacy one will find it there almost more certainly than in the fields themselves. Foot passengers take the footpaths in all but the worst weather, and the by-roads are little enough used save by an occasional grocer's cart or the parson's son upon his bicycle with his tennis-racket across the handle-bars.

Seen from a height, a countryside may appear extraordinarily populated ; thatched roof may almost touch thatched roof, and garden-tree twine its branches into the apple boughs of the next orchard ; but the real countryman travels so little that, save where there are many "residents," the population of both high-road and lane is extravagantly small. He works, the countryman, in his nearest fields ; his wife stays indoors and mends things ; it is only the fringe, the hangers-on, the *dilettanti*, the children going to or from school, and the distributors of the means of existence, who make use of the roads of either class. They are used, the roads, by all sorts of inhabitants of fields and thickets ; the hedgerow birds have a tameness, an unconcern that they would show in no coppice, where the presence of an intruder will be heralded by all sorts of warning notes, sibilant and rancorous, or by the wild flutter of

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

arising wood-pigeons. I remember once having fallen into a sort of reverie upon a road, and come to a halt unconsciously. I do not know what was in my mind, something pleasant and engrossing, I think, because the day was hot, the hedgerows sweet and umbrageous, and the long high-road sloped down into the distant blue of the Devonshire sea. Suddenly, many yards away, a strange little beast with a fantastic gait appeared to be covering the ground with tiny bounds. Seen from the front it was impossible to recognise it; it had the amble of no creature that one is familiar with. I stood still, and it advanced, paying no manner of attention to me. It assumed a reddish hue, its progress took the aspect of a series of tiny bounds, its tail in foreshortening lengthened out. It was a squirrel—and it passed right over my foot.

The episode was disagreeable to me, because in my part of the country they say that when the woodland beasts no longer regard you, you are “fey”—as good as a ghost. But it gave the measure of the solitude of that particular highway that so shy a beast as a squirrel could use a road for its passage upon any errand. And it travelled with an engrossed certitude, as if it were very assured of no danger or interruption. And indeed I had met no one for the last half-hour, and I met no one else till I got to Kingsbridge, a matter of three miles. Yet this was a main coast road leading to a market town, the metropolis of that peninsula.

BETWEEN THE HEDGEROWS

Even on market-days, when once a week the highways assume the air of processional routes, it is only a small fraction of the country populations that shows itself. There will be farmers in their gigs; if the day be fine their wives will be with them too, and the hearts of the shopkeepers will be rejoiced. (I use the word "gig" generically for the farmer's conveyance. It is very largely a matter of fashion or of roads. Thus, round Canterbury the farmer almost invariably uses some kind of dogcart, whilst in Devonshire and Cumberland he goes to market mostly on horseback, and round Salisbury the roads are filled with enormous and dusty versions of the familiar governess car.) Farmers, stock-breeders, veterinary surgeons, horse dealers, a small army of cattle drovers and successive companies of sheep, cattle, pigs, and even turkeys at times, will on these market-days pass in a pageant, out in the morning, home in the afternoon when the hour of the ordinary is passed. For an hour or two of the day the shops will be filled, the streets be impassable, the stairs of the inns be thronged with men falling over each other's legs, in a fine atmosphere of malt liquors and a fine babel of prices and the merits of foodstuffs. But before night-fall each particular little heart of the country will once more have discharged its rustic blood as with one great weekly pulse; the dust or the mud of the highways will bear the impress of the innumerable feet of sheep, and silence and solitude will once more descend between the hedgerows, along which the

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

white forms of owls will beat without sound. And so it will be all round the year.

But even the pulse-tide of market-days will not dislodge from their crannies and pockets the great populations of the country. The real labourer will go on working over his furrows, whether wheat fall below starvation price, or wool rise from fivepence to tenpence halfpenny. So that upon the roads the townsman come into the country will not make any intimate acquaintance even with the outward aspects of the whole body politic of the country. He will learn, first, how little he or his great town matters; and, lastly, how closely knit is the organisation of great stretches of territory that at first he will regard as so many miles of inhabited country occupied at haphazard by men having little organisation and less connection the one with the other. What will have swayed his particular town will in the country matter nothing. What will matter will be the price of things in the nearest market-place or cathedral city. Once out of his particular London the townsman will find himself come into the spheres of influence of innumerable places of small magnitude. "Going to town" will not be taking a railway journey to any great city; it will mean a short jaunt to Ashford, to Shrewton, to Kendal—or it may mean hardly more than going to the single shop of the next village. And going to town for the inhabitants of the small centres will mean going to centres only relatively more important—to Exeter, to Leicester, to Devizes,

to Manchester, or to Carlisle. And in each of these places the townsman will discover new trade-marks, new puddings, new newspapers, new specifics, new celebrities, new names to honour. His own standards will not any more count; his best known will be the utterly ignored; and he will discover that in coming to his particular heart of the country, in searching for his Islands of the Blest, his fountain of youth, he will have gone through a sort of purification. He will have lost, along with his old landmarks, his very identity. And only very, very gradually will he take to himself a new form, a new power of influence for good or evil, a new knowledge, and even a new appellation. For quite assuredly some nickname will be assigned to him.

He will grow wise in time; he will get to know all the highways and lanes, and having exhausted their aspects and their lore, will take to the field paths. But even there—and there more than ever—he will have driven in upon him that fact of the extraordinary solidity and solidarity, the extraordinarily close grain of life in the heart of the country. It will depend upon himself whether or no he will ever force a way somewhere beneath its close-textured skin; whether he will take, as it were, real roots in the soil, or still for his social and mental support will call in aids from outside. He will have come to the heart of the country for rest; he will, if he is to be at one with it, find himself engaged only in a new struggle.

ACROSS THE FIELDS



CHAPTER II

ACROSS THE FIELDS

THE wheat, the pastures, the slow beasts, birds, flowers and the little foot-bridges from which we may look into the dark waters of clear brooks, the hum of insects and the dewdrops that form a halo round our shadows when we walk across the fields in the moon-light or at dawn—all these parts of what we call Nature must of necessity take the second place, fill up the second phase of a country life. Being men, we must first settle our human contacts ; then we may step over the stiles or pass between the kissing-gates. We must have found our *pied-à-terre*, our jumping-off place ; we must set up our tripod before, as it were, we can take our photographs. We must have studied our maps, have asked our ways, have got the “lie of the land.”

This is no more than saying that we must have taken our bed at the inn, or have furnished our cottage and discovered where the nearest butcher has his shop ; we must have “settled down” either in body or in spirit. Reversing the course of history,

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

we must learn the highways which were built last before we can master the old ways of all—the field-paths. How long the first stage may be in its passing through is a matter that each man settles with his soul; it is essentially a matter of how much interest he can take in the practical side of his settling down. There are men so happily made that their pleasant lives are spent in doing little tasks in their rockeries or passing the time of day at tennis in walled gardens. They find, as it were, freedom in prisons; whilst others breathe only when they have the turf beneath their feet and are out of sight and sound of the roadside hedgerows.

I do not know that these latter penetrate more deeply, really, into the life of the country, but I am certain that they draw the deeper breaths. They take, as it were, the short cuts across life and, avoiding their fellow-men who present the more harrowing problems to the mind, they float along a stream of minute facts that afford solace, distraction or rest. There is, after all, nothing so soothing as to watch the growth of grasses, and no man to be envied so much as he who can keep his mind for so long tranquil. If the high-roads might lead us to some palace of human truth, somewhere along the footpaths, between a wood track and an oak-bole, we might find Nirvana and the Herb Oblivion.

We may find, too, the country in its undress, since the footpaths lead us to back doors or through stack-

yards, whilst to the high-roads farms and cottages turn their lace-curtained windows and their decorous drives. I had an equestrian friend who had passed during a number of years on a main road a square, stuccoed, dull box that was known as New Place. He visited it during several croquet seasons, and, entering it always through the front door, saw no reason to think that it was other than just a new place like any other. But one day, being afoot on the dull highway, he saw a kissing-gate in the hedge and a track that led across a broad bend of the wood. He passed outside a stone-walled stack-yard, and at a pleasant distance there raised itself a charming, mellowed structure of red brick with six gables that offered to the rolling fields a glance, a yellow of lichens and a tracery of wall-pears it had taken three centuries to attain to. He could not fix the place in his mind; he could not find a name for it; it seemed miraculous that in a land he knew so well there could have been such a house unknown to him. Then he realised that it was the back of New Place. The front had been stuccoed and squared to suit the tastes of the 'fifties. It offered that view to the new high-road; but the ancient path, that had been there before any house at all had stood, had led him to the other and the lovelier aspect.

The footpath, indeed, much more than doubles the attraction of the countryside, since the tracks, leading mostly from cottage to cottage, are almost innumer-

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

able. It is one of those things to which one hardly ever gets used—it is one of those things that change alike the aspect of countrysides and of the men who work upon them. I had walked a certain road for many days; I had seen for many days a certain labourer, not on the face of him estimable, slouching at night towards his beer-house. Suddenly, one evening, I saw this man, his rush basket slung across his back, with a bundle of rabbit-parsley tucked into the thongs; he was descending, so slowly that he appeared to hang in air, an ungracious Gany-mede in fustian, over a hurdle that had appeared merely to close a gap in a hedge. Behind him, in the grass there ran the sinuous snake of a pathway, wavering as if for companionship beside a coppice or a little shaw. And it was a relief—a clearing of the air. For the man will appear no longer a loafer, sustained from hour to hour through the day by the thought of beer, or kept in suspense, as it were, by the cankerous artistry of self-indulgence. Here he was dropping into the road with limbs rendered heavy by work; he has become part of the body politic, one of those slow Titans who like wood-props keep up the inordinately weighty fabric of the State. He has gained dignity, and, since the number of inhabitants of my village is small, the whole village has gained dignity, and the whole world of which that village is the part with which I am best acquainted.

And with the discovery of a new footpath the

countryside gains, to more than the extent of one new way, a feeling of liberty. The road you have traversed is less a begrimed piece of dust running between imprisoning hedges. You yourself are more free, since, if the wish moved you, here you could step aside ; the fields on each side of the bridge seem more accessible, more your own and your neighbour's, less the property of an intangible landowner. For I think that it is inborn in humanity to resent another man's ownership in land. Those of us who belong to the land-owning class resent trespass on our acres ; but the minute we become travellers beyond our own ring-fence we desire, even unreasonably, to make short cuts. There was once a Midland squire whose acquaintance I had made actually through trespassing upon his home paddock. He had then been irate so that his grey whiskers trembled. It seemed that he had just lost a right-of-way action and he thought I was part of a "put up job," to flaunt his loss of the right-of-way case in his face. I had pleaded my ignorance of the neighbourhood, the greater freedom of our parts of the country in such matters ; and I succeeded in convincing him so well of my innocence that he conducted me across his own kitchen-garden very amiably towards the high-road from which I never ought to have strayed.

I met this same gentleman later at an inn in a foreign countryside more or less my own ; we took a walk together, after he had good-humouredly recog-

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

nised me as the “fellow who trespassed”—and I was horrified at the short cuts that he proposed to take to reach a certain church. We went over peasants’ fields of tobacco, across the corner of a protected stag park, through a vineyard, and right into the door of the priest’s cowshed before we emerged in the churchyard. My friend had made a bee-line, and it was only in the miraculous absence of a *garde champêtre* that we escaped a fine, since the squire actually plucked an apple from a wayside tree, tasted it, and swore it was like wood compared with a Ribston pippin. Outside his own circle of landed responsibilities he felt himself, in fact, to be a free Briton.

In a sense we are all that. The average Briton does indeed tremble at the thought of “trespassing.” He trembles even unreasonably, since, except for the obviously poor, no penalty attaches to the offence. But he has a sort of shyness; it is hardly so much respect for the laws; he would dislike being turned off land, perhaps because it would mean a sort of “setting down” for him. Yet the one of us most shy about trespassing will the most violently resent being impeded on a footpath once he is assured that it *is* a footpath. He will break down fences or furiously harangue gamekeepers; he will go his way—he will, more than any Hampden, assert his rights.

And because we are all lovers of our rights, we rejoice at the discovery of new paths. Here is a strip of land a foot wide, but inalienably the property

of ourselves and our neighbours—a space of breathing-ground and of escape, where, as it were, we may remain within the letter of the law and yet cheat its spirit. Of course, if we are poor men, the path will have its dangers; a keeper, intent on preserving the privacy of his partridge nests, *may* lay a dead rabbit beside the path and, walking after us with a mate, swear it lay there just after we had passed. Then probably we shall be fined ten shillings. (I have known a footpath closed to all the cottagers of a village by this dread.) But essentially the footpath is a place on which we may all snap our fingers at Authority; so for that alone it is beloved.

And the paths, in most of England, are innumerable. I know whole tracts of country, forty miles long, in which there is hardly a field that one may not walk across or skirt. Thus, for instance, from Aldington Knoll you may pass under the nut boughs and oaken underwood of the Weald, thirty-seven miles, by wood paths, only going out of the shadow to cross a road, or where the timber has been newly felled. There are, of course, tracts of the home counties and the Midlands where, in the presence of the landowning spirit and the absence of a spirit of resistance, miles of fat fields shaded by elms are closed to the wayward foot. And there are immense moors and downs where the pedestrian may choose his own way by a compass across heather and ling or sheep turf and wild thyme, where the footpath ceases on account of so great a freedom of direction. But the country

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

of parks and millionaires is not the country, but a sort of arid pleasure tract, and moors and plains are unhallowed by the work of the slow countrymen. For certainly, wherever he is busied about the hedgerows or in the wheat, there his lines of communication will be found. Their real cause for existence is to help him the more quickly to and from his work; and the farmer is not yet born so foolish as to hinder his own hours of labour.

Thus here, as in the print that is common in our hedge alehouses, and more common still in France, the man who works in the fields bears the brunt of the fray. It is true that you may trace—mostly on hill-tops—the old ways of communication, pilgrim ways that pass the remains of tiny chapels-of-ease and make, like the rays of a spider's net, either to the shrine of St. Thomas or towards the ports from which men set sail for Compostella; there are broad soft roads across plains; there are bridle-paths that climb immense downs and in the softer bottoms are paved, still, with great flag-stones, and there are pack-tracks that have been abandoned for ever by the feet of mules. In the North of England, in the folded valleys and scars of the solitary hills, you may still, as it were, see the hoof-marks of the pack-horses the last of which made its last journey not twenty years ago. And the survivals of all those tracks do still add to the number of ways by which a man may travel across the fields. But they remain mere survivals; the reason for their existence having

gone, they are seldom travelled; fences are being run across them more and more as the years go on. It is no one's business to keep them alive; so they are dying out.

Thus the footpath of the heart of the country tends to become more and more a means of access to work. And indeed it is there that we seem to feel the real heart-beats. On the roads the touch of the cities is still to be felt. Miles and miles away from any town one may be, nevertheless the road is a filament, a vein, running from one to another. The real footpath is the telephone, steering merely between countryman and countryman. It is true that in the vicinity of the house-congeries we may find footpaths that are degraded into cinder tracks. Broad and black—that colour for which the Nature of the fields seems to have so great an antipathy—they are bordered with fringes of grass so green that it appears, like the brilliant hues of aniline dyes, to be a coal-tar product. These tracks let the foot sink into them with a faint suggestion of being quick-sands. They pass cement cottages; dusty palings separate them from the sordid bits of spaded earth that always in the vicinity of a town seems to have a dun colour, a clay consistency, and a top-dressing of bluish meat tins. Reaching in his walk these anti-septic footways, the lovers of the country or the town lover feel an antipathy, heave perhaps a sigh, and, making for the nearest street, look out for a cab.

It is not that they will necessarily hate the town;

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

what they will hate is the hybrid thing that is neither town nor country—that is, a product as it were of city fathers trying to bring themselves into a bucolic state of mind. “Let us have either town or country unadulterated; let us have paths in which we shall meet humanity in undress or citizens decently clad!” he will exclaim. On these ways he will meet mechanics in broadcloth or the club-doctor of mean streets in clothes that are neither here nor there. Then he will seek swiftly either the shop-fronts, the artificial stone façades, the electric light standards and the faint smell of horse-dung and dust of the centre of a town; or he will return upon his tracks to where the path ran beneath nut bushes in the heart of a wood.

The false idlers of the country, the young ladies picking flowers, the retired solicitors, admirals, bankers, and racing touts, the village clergyman who thinks that his real sphere is, say, a smart West End parish, and who in consequence wears a querulous fold near the ends of his pursed lips, or that most townish of all inhabitants of the country, the student of nature—these, occasionally, with their infinite variations, are the most exotic products that one will meet on the footpaths. They have dropped, as it were, over the hedges, out of motor cars or desirable residences. They pass us like foreigners, and have haughty and challenging glints in their eyes. And I am almost tempted to say that the lovers of nature, the self-conscious students of birds

or flowers—the modern Whites of Selborne—are themselves town products. The real countryman does not know much about these things. He accepts them, and would perhaps miss them; but it is hardly part of his nature to “name” them. It would probably be disturbing to him to enquire too closely into the history, say, of the oil-beetle, that lustrous inactive creature that he crushes with his heavy foot in the hot dust of the roads.

It would disquiet him, it would disturb the simple and large outlines of his conception of life, just as to conceive of eternity, of infinity, or of the indefinite immortality of the soul would be disturbing to most of humanity. We live, poor creatures of a day that we no doubt are, in the midst of these mysteries, much as the countryman lives among beasts, fowls, and insects, one more mysterious than the other; but the consideration of these shivering abstractions humanity leaves to the priests, the metaphysician, and all the other soul doctors whom it agrees to regard as slightly extra-human. In the same spirit the countryman leaves Nature to the stranger who lives in the field. We crush with a careless foot a creature impeded by the dust. But supposing we knew that from egg to lustrous wing this beetle had made a journey more perilous and more miraculous than any *Odyssey* of Ulysses—that it had survived a chance of a million to one against its survival? Some such life-history as this is to be told of how many small creatures of the grasses and

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

the brooks? It is laid, as an egg, anywhere in the earth; it must, when it comes forth, find a certain plant. Say a million eggs are laid; say a hundred thousand tiny creatures reach the plant. It must then ascend the stalk of that certain plant; it must reach the stamens of the flower, a dizzy journey in the course of which ninety thousand succumb to rain, to predatory insects, to birds, to the Will of God manifested in one way or another; there remain ten thousand in these flowers. There they must stay until a certain bee comes to gather honey: one thousand are able to hold to life till then. When the bee comes they must grapple to a certain spot of the bee's hairy thigh; they must be carried by the bee home to its cell: one hundred may reach the bee's cell. There, at the precise moment that the bee lays its egg, the beetle larvæ must drop into the egg: maybe ten will do that; and maybe one, after having fattened on the life juices of the bee-grub, will come forth to the air a beetle—one survivor of a million! And it has gone through these perils, it has endured the fatigues, the hair-breadth escapes, the miraculous chances of this great journey, to be crushed by a hob-nailed boot before it has travelled one yard on the face of the earth. To what end?

For assuredly the countryman would ask, "To what end?" The nature student has essentially a concrete mind. He observes, he registers. He sees little yellow birds with jerking tails gliding over the

surface of a water-plant, searching in the hot sunlight meticulously for tiny insects. He notes the fact, and it is sufficient for him. But the countryman is either nearer God or nearer the necessities of life, put it in which way you will. He desires to know “what is the good of the thing?” How much weight of seed-corn will so much nitrate-fertiliser add to the yield of his acre?—What is the good of an oil-beetle? he would ask, if it came into his head to consider.

Perhaps it is fortunate that he never does. For, surrounded as he is, overwhelmed as he is by the tremendous profusion, the inexplicable, seeming waste of Nature, he would inevitably come to ask that question which is the end of human effort.

I know a farmer—rather a good farmer—who came from Lincolnshire into Kent, and was in consequence called “Linky” in our marsh parish. He became, perhaps on account of the change in the soil, singularly loquacious and singularly full of ideas. Things went wrong with him, and he began, as the saying is, to hear the grass growing.

Tall, gnarled, bony, with enormous joints all over his frame, he stopped me one day on a high-road and began to put all sorts of questions as to the good of things. What was the good of charlock? Why had God made bindweed and the turnip-flea? Why was a man to feel as if he were overlooked—bewitched? His old horse, who was cropping the hedge, nearly overturned the cart that contained a dilapidated

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

turning-lathe; Linky had just bought it at a sale, not that he needed it, but because once, years before, it had come into his head that a turning-lathe might be a thing to possess. He caught the horse's rein furiously, pulled the beast into the road, and then, with a sudden, dispirited motion of his hand, let go the rein, and pointed over the ridge inland. "The Union's there," he said; "and I feel it's calling me! I feel it." He turned on me: "Now, I ask you, sir, what's the good of all this? What's the good?"

He was not exactly dejected—in fact, his eyes, sunk beneath a grotesquely-bumped forehead, were remotely humorous. He looked over the plains on both sides of the ridge. There were things agrowing all over there, he said. All sorts of things. They scratched up fields and tried to make corn come; but weeds came with the blessing of God—weeds didn't need no help. Same with vermin as took his poultry; same with mildew as turned his dumplings sour in the larder. Well, now, what were all those things? What did it all mean? If so be the weeds had a right to be there, they were of some account. God looked after them and the vermin. Then where did *he* come in—he, Linky? Perhaps he wasn't of no more account than weeds or vermin. Then what was the good of going on?

Linky, of course, had been drinking a little. But, as far as I have been able to discover, it was that sort of thought that had made him take to drink.

And, as a rule, so stern is the fight that Nature wages with the countryman that, once he begins to think that kind of thought, he *must* take to drink or one of the devils of the flesh. In consequence, the survivors, the men who keep to the land, are precisely those who do not look around them, and who do not name the beasts and the plants. Weeds are weeds, and vermin vermin. You kill them one with another, and there's an end of it. You must have a very firm belief that the fields are made for crops, the pastures for grass, and yourself the instrument of God's administering the earth, or you will very soon slacken in your struggle.

Man does not "name" his fellow-strugglers, partly from indifference, no doubt, but also because he is afraid. I remember seeing a whole downside in central England white with a flower that I did not recognise. It was something like a bleached campanula, but square-stemmed and sweetly scented. There were several village children, with long black hair, big black eyelashes, and blue eyes—a type as unfamiliar as the flower—kneeling down and plucking the white blossoms, their hair sweeping the tops of the long grasses. I asked one the name of the flower. None of them knew, but they were picking them to put on the coffin of little Charley, who had been drowned in the mill-dam down the hill last Saturday night.

A sudden and violent death of a child is a thing so outstanding in country districts, that, up there in

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

the white light of the sun, on the green of the grass, very high, the news seemed to make one see beneath the shadows of the massive trees far down in the hollow a deeper shadow. But no one in that countryside seemed to know a name for those flowers—neither the children nor the clergyman, nor even the schoolmistress. They were flowers that were used for putting on coffins—simply “flowers,” as we say, “Let us get some flowers for the table.” And indeed such things are generally sorted roughly into broad categories—thus, most green things lacking flowers or odours are “weeds,” most gay-coloured blossoms not known to be poisonous are “flowers”—and most white flowers are omens of death, since they are used to deck biers, and at such times alone are carried home. I always remember the tone of weary contentment with which an old lady, suffering much pain, received a gift of snow-drops brought in ignorance of the meaning attached to them. “You’re letting me go,” she said. “I’ve wanted to go for a long time; now I shall.” And very shortly afterwards she died. No one else of her friends or family would have brought white flowers into her home.

White hawthorn, Madonna lilies, the white owls that screech, so it is said, outside lighted windows, white insects that sometimes fly in at the casement, in certain districts even daisies and marguerites and Scotch roses—all these things are ominous of death if they enter the house. I have even heard it said

that certain feathery, and delicate moths that come very rarely to flutter round one's lamp at night, are the souls of the dead coming to summon away the living. The emblems of life are rarer; but in a Lancashire cottage I heard a sick girl say, when a friend brought her the first pink dog-rose of the season, "Now I shall get well since I've lived so far round the year." And to see the first swallow is, in certain parts, regarded as an assurance of life until these travellers return again over the seas.

In the same large way owls, hawks, jays, shrikes, and cuckoos are classified as vermin; swallows, robins, and sometimes wrens are given their names and regarded as sacred; edible birds, from pheasants to jacksnipes, are called game or wild fowl; and most song birds and such others as have brownish plumage are called, and hated as, sparrows. An American naturalist who covered half the globe and a portion of England in the forlorn hope of hearing a nightingale sing, had the fortune to hear Philomela herself called "a sparrer."

But this large acceptance of the pleasures afforded by nature implies no lack of appreciation. Upon the whole, I think the real countryman enjoys the sights, the sounds, the heat of the sun, and the odour that the earth gives off after rain—he enjoys them as much as and perhaps with a more pagan enjoyment than any of the townsmen, who get much of their pleasure out of books. A townsman will read pages of such passages—

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

“A linnet warbles, a bee drops over the hedge, the tips of the hawthorn petals commence to become brown, the odour of bean flowers is wafted from the neighbouring field”—a whole catalogue of rural sights and sounds, that will as it were “waft an odour” of the country into the atmosphere of fog and gaslight. In the same spirit ladies who never cook will read old-world recipes, and “book lovers” who have no still-room will smack their lips in imagination over cordials the concoction of which went out before stage-coaches died from the roads.

And coming into the country, the townsman will find that some of the glamour that he felt in his room attaches for him to the monotonous chaffinch as, with its shimmer of rose, purplish-brown and grey-white it drops, crying “Pink, pink,” from an elm bough into the long grass beside the footpath.

In the same way a person with a very good cook of her own will dredge flour into boiling milk, scorch her face above a wood fire, prepare passably, and eat and enjoy hasty pudding or frumity—things not unpleasant to the palate, though, save for the associations of their names, not really worth scorching one’s face for. And I have known a sober friend seriously endanger his equilibrium by drinking my own mead on a summer day, rather because of the sound of the name than because the liquor is really delightful.

The countryman, of course, never eats hasty pudding save when some accident has taken his

ACROSS THE FIELDS

missus unprepared; frumity, even in Dorsetshire, he will no longer look at; mead he might drink in winter to keep off a cold when he cannot get hot rum with a lump of butter in it; but he will certainly not read "Nature books," and he will certainly never get into the frame of mind that will make him transfer the thoughts of any book into his attitude *vis-à-vis* of Nature herself. He has a general phrase that he applies to all these things. "It does you good . . ." It does you good to see the wheat go rippling in great waves up a twenty-acre field; it does you good to smell rain coming up on the south-west wind, to hear church-bells chiming melodiously across smooth grass, to hear the birds singing in the dawn, to watch hounds break covert, to stand gazing at a great sunset, to hear the jingle of harness as the horses come back from the hayfields in the moonlight.

Labourers, farmers or their womenfolk develop tastes in such matters. One man loves a frosty dawn, with the roads as hard as iron in the ruts; another likes the feel of the north wind on his hands. Another loves the coolness that comes with the sea wind only after immense heat in a long day; another, the peculiar tang of odour that rises with mist from the salt marshes. What may influence these tastes you never learn. The man I spoke of as loving a frosty dawn, told me (I met him at such a moment—a gnarled shepherd, a "looker," as they call them, not much higher than my shoulders, with

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

whiskers glistening with rime and his black clay pipe sending forth the tiniest wisps of smoke in the face of a blood-red sun) that on such a morning as that he was first breeched. No doubt, the pride of that transition from babyhood to boyhood sanctified such frosty mornings for ever in his mind. Perhaps association has most to do with it—perhaps the mere sensation of physical well-being. Who can tell?

But certain shadows and lights, certain winds that quicken the blood in the veins, certain cloud forms, the songs of certain birds, or certain views at certain times of day—one each of one or other of these things will undoubtedly give a “moment”—the moment of the year—to every countryman. And these things hold him in a country that is every day losing its other attractions.

I know a country solicitor, a grave, unsentimental, taciturn man, who repressed with sternness any tendency towards imagination in his children or his clerks. He was offered an exceedingly lucrative partnership in London, and he refused it because of a sunset. It was a long valley that wound away between spurs right into the west, and there the sun always went down with an incredible glory, sending its light level along the bottoms, mirroring itself on flat stretches of mist or glistening in winding channels. At the eastward end a hill rose, and standing by a windmill the solicitor was accustomed to look at this sunset every Sunday evening. He

had seen it for years and he could not leave it. And, indeed, this particular sunset view—it was seen between tall stone pines—attracted all the little town on Sundays. You met, on the path to the mill, the blacksmith, the grocers, the hotel-keeper's wife, the village lovers from hamlets all round, the squire's cook, and the Wesleyan minister. These people would gaze and gaze and go away without saying anything. No doubt for the blacksmith it sublimated the thoughts of the price of shoeing iron, and for the others, too, it put a fine or a tranquil glory into that moment of their existence. One rather inarticulate person once told me that the conflagration of the descended sun and the lights whirled heavenwards from the mists and pools reminded him of the Plains of Heaven. I fancy that he was thinking of Martin's picture of that name. On the other hand, a man of great taste, who had savoured, as a connoisseur does his wine, many famous views the world over, regarded such a sunset and remarked that it was very suburban.

That is the connoisseur, speaking from the outside; but the real peasant, the real pagan, loves nature and the earth inarticularly. After we have worked for long hours of long days in the years that beneath the sky are so long in turning, we get, even the most inarticulate of us, moments of sensuous delight from merely being in the place in which we are. The woodman, working alone in the thick woods, will at noon in the winter sunshine stand still and lean on

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

his axe. In his small clearing he will feel as if he were in a church. (I have heard a man say so.) The sunlight will be warm, the silence absolute all round him, and the very sound of the other axes in the distance will be deliberate, reflective, as if sacred. Or the farmer, lying on his stomach in the dewy grass at twilight along the edge of a black coppice, waiting with his gun for the rabbits to enter dimly out of the burrows—in the shadows and the silence, beneath the brush of the owl's wing as it skims over him, he will feel the indefinite fear of the supernatural steal over him, a curious sense of mournful ominousness different altogether in kind from the dread that will beset him in any haunted house or churchyard.

One gets, if one be at all sensitive, odd little shocks and emotions in the fields. I have myself dug very late in a potato patch, after many hours in a hot day. There comes a time when one cannot leave work; one goes on as long as light holds, even if it be only the light of the stars. The whitened apple trunks stand out like the pillars of an aisle down by the hedge; the glow of the supper fire dances visible in reflection on the cottage ceiling, the sound of the brook becomes important in a windless dusk. And the air having grown cool after the sun had set, I have thrust my hand into the earth to feel for potatoes, and found it flesh-warm. After all the heat seemed to have departed from the world it was like suddenly coming in contact with a living being. I am, perhaps, over fanciful, but to me it has always

seemed like finding the breast of a woman—as if Nature herself had taken a body and the heat of life.

But, indeed, in the intense solitude of field work the mind exhausts its material topics. And of material topics there are few enough in the country and its cottages; so that the mind of the man who is much employed along the hedgerows turns inwards very often and exhausts itself in metaphysical speculations. This is more particularly so at dusk, when not only is there little to think about but less to see. In the countryman's mind there arise superstitions about beasts and birds, theories of life and of the universe, even new religions. He will be extraordinarily callous in the face of death; but he will be wonderful in his speculations as to what will happen after death.

I knew very well a labourer of the rather better class. Small, very brown, with the clear enunciation that still in places survives the blurred cockney of the school-teacher's work, with little eyes that twinkled in a clear-cut face, he was much sought after in the village as a sick nurse during nights, when the wife of a man needed rest. Certain men have the gift of being asked, the soothing voice and the willingness to perform these last functions—and my friend must have seen the death of many men. Quietly, but without any abating of the twinkle in his eyes, he would tell you how So-and-So died “sweering dreadful”; So-and-So went off sudden

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

like the bottom falling out of a bucket of water; whilst it was more than he could do to hold down old Sam, the hop-dryer, who had the delirium tremens, so he died on the floor. And at an inquest I have seen Mark go up to the corpse that we were viewing and, catching hold of the hand, say, "Reckon that won't ever lift no more pots; 'tis main still for you now, old Quarts." "Quarts" was the sobriquet of the dead man, and he had died of the cold.

There, in the rough barn where we stood huddling together for warmth, Mark was brave enough, and he was brave enough in a death-chamber. Indeed it is hardly braveness, just as it is hardly callousness so much as a survival of the early temper of men accustomed to the ending of lives—of the temper that has given us the "Dance of Death" or the Gravedigger of Hamlet. A dead man is to the countryman of hardly more account than a dead mole or the dry tufts of feathers that January leaves underneath all the bushes. It is a frame of mind repulsive or grotesque to the townsman, who never sees a dead thing save on butchers' and fishmongers' slabs, where indeed he sees more than enough. In the countryman it is merely part of that large innocence that allows him to accept as so many of the natural processes of life things that are always hidden in towns behind the serried walls of house-fronts. He sees more of life, and of necessity more of death.

But this same Mark had his own private conception of what would happen to *him*. He was not in the

least mad, but he had—who knows how?—gathered it out of the Scriptures that he would never die, but be carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire. His eyes twinkled humorously when he said so, but you would put him into a fury if you expressed a doubt. He was a hedger and ditcher by trade, and, if he heard a rustling of some invisible object in the dusk or in the woods at night, he was tranquilly convinced that it was one of the Beasts of the Revelation. Being unmarried and living by himself in a tiny, disused toll-house, he was more solitary than most, and had more time to think. And it is astonishing how many countrymen have bizarre beliefs of this kind. I have come across them in tenant farmers, in veterinary surgeons, in water-bailiffs, and even in rural policemen—who, indeed, are the most solitary of all the users of high-roads and footpaths. The fact is that to be alone much in the country is to find oneself giving to hills, rows of trees or the coping-stones of bridges—to anything that one likes or dislikes for the obscure reasons that sway us—personal identities. One measures the world, after all, in human terms, and two foxes' earths on a knoll will take after a time a semblance of eyes in a green forehead, just as houses have grim or jovial or lugubrious personalities expressed in their window blinds. And thus, for reasons obscure to us, certain portions of the familiar country influence us. There are hills that we ascend without weariness and downward slopes that we vaguely dislike; there are sheltered spots that for no

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

known reason we find lugubrious, and bleak downs where some mysterious presence seems to temper to us the most dreary of winds. In that way a country-side comes to have the value of a personality ; and so we speak of the spirit of Place.

Standing on certain hills it is impossible not to feel a conviction that the green earth waving away on each side into illimitable space is a vast entity, living in the growth of its grasses, and in the voice of its birds, the little tunnels of subterranean beasts and insects forming its veins and, whatever be the colour principle of its surfaces, being the blood of its complexion. But the feeling is arrived at only after a sufficient familiarity—a familiarity the length of which will differ with each individual, since there are some of us who will fall in love with a certain corner of the earth, even as with a certain woman, at the first glance. And just in the same way there are featureless stretches of land in which we feel at once at home, whilst blue regions of alps, of woods and mirroring lakes tire us as we may be tired by a brilliant talker.

For myself, no landscape is restful unless it contains many hedges and woods, and unless the horizon is somewhere broken into by the line of the sea—unless at least I feel that, from the top of a hill near at hand, that still, blue line might be seen. Far inland I seem to be beneath an impalpable weight, and on an absolutely naked down I am conscious of glancing round, in search of at least a clump of trees in which

I might take refuge from the great gaze of the sky. But I have one friend who cannot live at peace out of sight of heather, and another who hates hedge-rows because they interrupt the journey of his eye over the contours of the ground. I knew a farmer who moved from the marsh into the uplands ; and he was forced to rent a cottage on the level again, because he missed the stagnant dykes and could not bear the sound of running water in the beck beneath the bedroom window of his farm in the hills.

In the stage of intimacy to which a man reaches as soon as he masters the field ways of his country-side he thus begins to make acquaintance with the mysteries of the earth ; he begins, according to the light vouchsafed to him, to frame his own reading of the green kingdoms. He does it, no doubt, in the search for intellectual solace ; it is part of his journey in quest of the Fortunate Islands. In a sense and to a certain degree other things will turn him aside. He will find refuge from himself in making toys for his children, in sleep by his fireside, in the slow talk of the ale bench, in the hunting-field, or over a book. No doubt the book is the best of all the things with which a man may stave off introspection, if the gossip of the alehouse be not better. And no doubt next to these we may place the saddle. Books and small-talk bring us in contact with the minds of our fellows ; we may revel or idle in them without emulation and without effort. In hunting we are taken

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

out-of-doors and brought into contact with beasts wrought up to their highest pitch, and with the animal in ourselves wrought up, that too to its highest vitality.

To the man who can feel it there is no sensation in life comparable to the waiting, on a frosty morning, by a woodside for the hounds to break cover. All the senses are keenly alive; each tuft of grass is of importance in the mist: the nostrils are filled with the faint twang of the morning and of the frost; the ears catch minute sounds—the crackle of underwood beneath the feet of the silent and distant hounds, the clink of stirrup against stirrup, the hard breathing of a horse. And one's whole body, all the sensation of feeling that one possesses, is instinct with the shiver and breath of the beast that one bestrides. There is no waiting quite like it, since there is nowhere else just this union of nerves in two beasts so widely dissimilar the one from the other.

With the first whimper of the hounds on the scent, with the note of the horn, the cry of "Gone Away!" or the crash of the hounds breaking covert, this particular psychological "moment" ends. Contests have their place and emulation is aroused in horse even more than in rider. It isn't—that particular tremour of waiting—recaptured at any check, though perhaps no theatrical performance is half so engrossing as the watching from one's saddle of the hounds, with their noses to the ground, making a wide circle to recover the scent. But of course one has moments

ACROSS THE FIELDS

of another sort. One remembers putting one's right arm over the eyes in rushing through a bullfinch. And I have a memory that I do not know whether I would or would not willingly dispense with, of lying helpless on my back on the further side of a sunken Devon hedge, with high above my face the silhouette against the sky of a horse's fore-legs and a rider's boot-tips. It seemed for a moment a curious and interesting spectacle, since it is seldom that one sees from below into the very shoes of a horse.

Thus in this as in all field sports, man, according to his sympathies, finds solace, oblivion, animal excitement, the means of passing the weary hours. They have their "moments," and afterwards we can say that there is nothing like them. There is nothing like casting the last salmon flies of the day at dusk into a still and almost invisible water; there is nothing like the old and forgotten shooting with a trained dog in the thigh-high stubble of October wheat-fields; there is, for boys, nothing like the laying of a trail of paper across the trembling tufts of a bog at noon; there is nothing like . . . But what is there anywhere like any one of these things that beneath the sky and across the green acres will keep the mind from working in the treadmill of its proper thought? And what, after all, will arouse a rough fellowship between man and man so well as the tumble and scurry in a stack-yard where the rats are bolting and squeaking among men and terriers, sheep-dogs, spaniels and broom-handles?

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

And in a sense the field naturalist pursues a similar sport. With his eyes or his field-glasses he shoots the events of little creatures' lives. To give himself moments, he is seeking to nail down to his consciousness the "moments" of their existences. Peering along the hedgerows, if he have seen a rabbit run fascinatedly around the uplifted head of a stoat, he will have bagged his event; or if he could see a cuckoo drop its egg into the nest of a chaffinch, the adder swallow its young alive, or the night-jar carry its children in its claws. He is building up his little house of observations; he is filling in the chinks of the wattle-wall that shuts out for him the monotony of his life. And the lines of the trees, the smell of the grass crushed beneath his feet, the sound of wind in the river reeds, the bow of the sky, the forms of clouds, or the great stillnesses of noon—all these things soothe his mind and make sacred these hours of his.

That in its way is the best gift that the Nature of the fields offers to man—a memory of oblivion tempered with a sensation that is hardly a memory of times passed with the cool airs on the cheek, with the eye unconsciously deluded and filled by the lines of a world drawing all its hues from the air, the soil and the vapours that hang as it were in a third space between air and soil. I have said that the most engrossing of pastimes are the gossip of the alehouse and the reading of men's thoughts. And in a sense these are the things that keep us going nowadays

through the between-beats of the clock. But there are times of break-down when neither of these human emanations has power to hold the mind, or, to put it more justly, when the mind has no longer the power to hold to them. After long periods of illness, of mourning, of mental distress, no news of the outside world and no ecstasy of verse will hold the mind ; events and thoughts pass through the tired consciousness leaving no trace, as the smoke of orchard fires passes through apple boughs. Then Nature may assert a sway of her own.

I remember seeing a countryman recovering from a long illness with his bed-head set towards the window. He seemed to be in a state of coma, but from time to time he asked for a looking-glass. Because his appearance after his illness was rather terribly emaciated, the glass was for long refused to him. At last he fell to weeping weakly, and some one found a hand-mirror for him. He held it high up, never looking at himself, but turning the face of the glass to the window. He had been longing to see the green of the grassy hill that rose up before his cottage, and although his brain had been too weak to say that he wished his bed turned round he had imagined that stratagem of bringing greenness into his confining room. It was a longing, he said afterwards, such as women are said to feel before the birth of children ; and no satisfaction ever equalled that of this poor man who had imagined himself doomed to die without again seeing sunlight on the grass.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

The country, in fact, the country of the fields and of the footpaths, gives most freely to those who bring something with them, whether it be the labour of their hands or of their brains, whether it be an interest, a hobby, a pursuit, a tranquillity or merely an exhaustion. To those whose minds are simply empty, or to those whose thoughts centre upon themselves, the country is a back cloth, a flat surface portraying an aching pageantry of hills, of fields, of woods, a concrete frame for a dull listlessness, or an intolerable prison. But to those who love her as a support, as an addition to a self-sacrifice, as a frame to a passion, to those who work and those who love, she is a beneficent personality. Ask indeed the lovers who wander along the little footpaths or shelter in the ways and nooks of woodlands what the country is to them. They might not answer in words, but they feel that hers is a beneficent presence, auspicious, soothing and sheltering, a presence that finds words for their dumbness, that lends them patience in their suspenses. So that when a lover says, "How sweet the May do smell!" he voices an unrest and praises at once the perfume of the flowers and the being of his mistress who has quickened his senses. And the worker with his mind who comes out of his door to stand gazing across level fields to the horizon, he too finds his thoughts purified and supported, set as they are in relief, so that his ideas themselves appear to be the pattern

ACROSS THE FIELDS

upon a groundwork of flat green. That indeed is the mission, the vocation of the fields that we cross—to be a groundwork for the thoughts of poor humanity that in its journey through life needs so many supports, so many solaces.

IN THE COTTAGES



CHAPTER III

IN THE COTTAGES

AT the end of a closed field, in a hollow of the woods, so deep and so moist that it was twilight there even at high noon, there stood a thatched mud cottage—a two-dwelling house—the door-sill of which I never crossed without anticipations of pleasure such as I have known on the sills of few houses. There lived at one end of the hovel an aged man for whom I had no respect, and in the low dark rooms, hung with clothes upon lines that kept away the draughts of the gaping walls, Meary.

I met her first at dusk, scrambling over the high stile of a path that, running between squatters' hovels on a common, was one of a maze of similar paved footways. In a purplish linsey-woolsey, as broad as the back of a cow, her face hidden in a black sun-bonnet that suggested the hood of a hop-oast, she was burdened with two immense baskets, from which protruded the square blue, white, and lead-coloured packages of the village grocer up on the ridge from which we had both descended. I

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

offered to carry her burdens as far as we might be going together, and she said, without the least touch of embarrassment or of over-recognition—

“Why, thank ye, mister. I’ll do as much for you when ye come to be my age.”

Her face was round and brown, her forehead broad and brown, and her brown eyes were alert and reposeful as if she were conscious of a reserve of strength sufficient to help her over all the stiles that are to be found in this life. They had, her eyes, the sort of masterfulness that you will see in those of a bull that gazes across the meadows and reflects.

I think I cared for her more than for any friend I have made before or since, and now that she has been dead for a year or so her memory seems to make sacred and to typify all those patient and good-humoured toilers of the fields that, for me, are the heart of the country. If you saw her at work in the hop-fields, with her hands and arms stained walnut-green to the elbows; in her own potato-patch stooping, in immense boots, to drop the seed potatos into the rows; striding through the dewy grass of the fields to do a job of monthly nursing; or standing with one hand over her eyes in the doorway that she fitted so exactly that her thin hair was brushed by the four-foot thatch, she had one unfailing form of words, one unfailing smile upon her lips—“Ah keep all on gooing!” And that was at once her philosophy and her reason for existence.

And to keep all on going until you drop—as she did, poor soul, until within three days of the appearance of her illness—that is the philosophy and the *apologia pro vita* of the country-side. Your ambition is simply that: health, so that you may keep getting about; strength, so that you may, to the end, do your bits of jobs and have a moment to do a job or two for a bedridden neighbour; and, in old age, a sufficient remainder of your faculties to pass censure on the doings of the neighbour you have helped. To have accepted helping hands enough to let you feel that you too are part of the body politic, and to have retained independence enough to let you refuse benefits when the spirit moves you—these are the undefined aspirations that keep occupied the weather-beaten cottages at the corners of fields, the two dwelling-houses with roofs green from the drip of orchard trees, and the quiet and solitary graveyards of the scattered hamlets.

This particular Meary, being just a month younger than the Queen (there is still only one Queen in the cottages), had lived just the life of every other countrywoman, and in her conversation, *à propos* of whatever topic might occur, fragments of her past life came constantly to the surface. If you spoke of the drought being bad for root crops, she would say—

“Ah! I lost my two toes after a bit of turnip-peel when I was four, jumping down into a ditch for it.”

In those days the children searched the dry ditches for such things. Or, before the A——d draper’s

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

window, she would give a quaint little idea of herself in a yellow nankin dress, cut so tight to save stuff that she could not move her tiny arms. You knew you had "innards" most days of the week, she said, when she was a child. Once, out of mischief, she had handed her mother, who was at the kneading-trough, a paper of snuff instead of one of allspice, and the whole week's baking came yellow and evil-tasting. But they had had to eat it. She had never eaten baker's bread till she was twelve, nor butcher's meat till she was twenty; sometimes they had had a bit of tug mutton, which comes from a sheep found drowned in a dyke. Her stepfather had a bit of bacon once a week, and then the children had the crock water it was boiled in.

After a time—"I was a pretty girl then, I'd have you to know," she used to say—she had been attracted by a travelling basket-maker. When he was about their village she used to slip out and put a pinch of tea into the kettle over his fire in the dingle. She was sent away into service to preserve her from an infatuation for the "pikey," who was not regarded as respectable, though he earned better money than two agricultural labourers. At nights, lying in the servants' bedroom of Lady Knatchbull's (the great house had as many windows as there were days in the year), the girls were accustomed to tell each other folk-stories—of queens who went wandering over the earth, having been turned out-of-doors for inscrutable reasons, whose hands

were cut off for reasons more inscrutable, or who were reconciled to their kingly husbands or princely sons at the price of a pound of salt. Or the dark room would be peopled with witches, or dismal songs sung of the murder of trusting girls—with obvious morals for the girls of the servants' room. There were twelve slept together there. They taught each other to read, but no one knew how to write, and Meary never learned. They were sent to church of a Sunday, filling a great square pew for all the world like a cattle truck, but they never learned anything of religion. Nevertheless, at times Meary dreamed of Jesus Christ preaching in a green field from a waggon, and telling the women again not to trust the men, but to be good to each other and to small children. Once while Jesus was preaching Meary's mother, who had died years before, came to her, dressed all in white, and told her to be a good girl.

But eventually the pikey came to mend baskets at the Hall, and she went away with him. She did not see any use in being married ; she reckoned it was something for the Quality. If he was your man, he was your man, and there was an end of it. If he wanted to leave you, he'd leave you, married or not ; it was all one. Once her man did leave her, and she walked right from Paddock Wood to St. Martin's Cliff in twenty-eight hours to find him again. It was on that journey that she saw the ghost. It was sitting on a milestone, dressed like a bride in a coal-scuttle bonnet. She thought it was just a woman,

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

and said, “Hullo, missus!” three times, to it. Then it raised its head, and she saw that there was no face in the bonnet.

“Oh, well, poor thing,” says Meary, “reckon I never hurt you and you’ve no call to hurt me.” So she went on her way along that long Dover road.

Eventually her man grew too weak or too lazy to keep the roads. He was much older than she, having already in 1815 been condemned to be hung for stealing oats when he was a waggoner’s mate, and having been reprieved on consenting to serve in the Navy during the Hundred Days. They settled down in a cottage by the canal at B—, and there for years Meary kept herself and him. She had a certain original genius, such as that which prompted her to keep fowls for profit at a time when no labourers had ever thought of such a thing; but for the rest she worked at stone-picking on the uplands, at tying hops, at potato-planting, at pea-sticking, at one of the hundred things by which the rural economy is maintained, and in addition she did her monthly nursing, her sick-tending, her laying-out corpses, and her weekly job of charing at the rectory. It was to secure this last that she eventually consented to be married to her man. Shortly afterwards he was stung in the leg by an adder, and, blood-poisoning setting in, he became more useless than ever. Then she fell, broke her leg, and lay for long weeks in hospital, using up all her savings of hen-money, until one day, being seized with a presenti-

ment, she rose, dressed herself, and, crawling in one way or another painfully home, she found her man dead. She retained a lame leg for the rest of her life.

And for the rest of her life she worked. She kept "all on going." Eventually, as I have said, she died very suddenly of cancer at the age of seventy-four. But even then she showed no signs of decay. You might have taken her for a hard-worked woman of forty; she was as solid and as brown as a clod of earth. She died, of course, in the workhouse infirmary, and of course, too, the chaplain, or the surgeon, or the man who drove her there, or possibly even myself, since I was known to have seen much of her, were suspected of having in some way got hold of "her money." For the poor, who ought in all conscience to know how hard it is to amass the smallest of sums, are exceedingly credulous as to the hoardings of old creatures living in the most sordid of hovels. I have seldom known an old woman die without some such legend attaching itself to her corsets, as that they crackled with bank-notes, or were as weighty as so much lead with a lining of sovereigns. In the French country, it is said that such old women have a very uncertain tenure of life, but the fact that such stories do not much attach to English countrysides should be evidence that the English peasant is more law-abiding in his imagination.

I was standing, I mean, in the doorway of a low French *estaminet* when there came in an exceedingly

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

old, toothless, and bowed woman, with a broken basket slung over her back. She began to talk in a happy gibberish of a *beau marin* who was to marry her next Thursday. She groped under the table with a pointed stick for a crust of bread that by a miracle lay on the sanded floor, and dropping it over her back into her basket, went her way, a hopping figure like a little old goblin, under the thin poplars of the immensely long and dusty road. "What a life!" said one man at a table.

"Why no," retorted the benignant-thinking hostess. "Is she not as happy as we others? When she finds such a crust of bread is it not to her as great a pleasure as to us when we add forty sous to our savings?"

Life is like that, after all! And if every new Thursday no *beau marin* comes to marry her, would it not be every next Thursday that he would marry her?

"Such a man," retorted a waggoner, sitting with his head between his hands—"such-and-such a man was seen on the thatch of her hut, listening at the chimney last week. One Thursday will come when, not the *beau marin*, but the excellent *sergents* will find her with her throat cut and her rooms stripped bare."

"You are a fool," the hostess blinked.

"Ah!" the waggoner answered, "don't we all know that M. Un Tel dropped old Marie Thérèse down the draw-well? They say she fell. But why did she go who had no cause to use water? And why was no money found?"

It is not that sort of story that one hears on the ale-house bench in England, and it is not the fear of the law of libel that prevents it. It is simply that the English imagination does not run in that groove. Or perhaps it is only that the English peasant is more patient, for in his stories the thief always waits for the old woman to die before going through her stays.

And indeed the fact that the only reward for a life of toil should be the empty reputation of stays quilted with bank-notes, or, for an old man, the legend of a baccy-box filled with golden sovereigns—that fact seems to be a proof of a wonderful patience in these tribes of the fields. For all the rest of humanity—for the humanity who read or write books, cast up ledgers, minister behind counters, bars or the grilles of banks—for all of us who do not walk behind the plough, draw furrows for potatoes, tie hops, or tend pigs, for all of us who are not down upon the earth itself, there is always a vision of a modest competence at our day's decline. But here there is nothing.

There is not in the country even a day-dream of anything. Upon the whole my Meary was the wisest person I have ever met. Broad-minded, temperate, benevolent, cheerful and cynical, she could confront every hap and mishap of life, whether her own, her neighbour's, or the state's, with a proper fortitude or a sane sympathy. She had experienced more vicissitudes in her own scale of things than had most people; she had

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

covered more miles of country and gone through more hours of toil. Yet her philosophy of life was simply that, that you "keep all on gooing." And even that you could only do if you were most fortunate, if you had that greatest of all gifts, health, which alone makes possible the pedestrian existence. Without that your "gooing" ends in the workhouse.

Perhaps that peasant imagination, the stays quilted with notes, is, as it were, a rudimentary trace of our ideal of retiring. It is the nearest approach to a castle in the air, a faint mirage of our impossible Island of the Blest. It is the peasant's acknowledgment that a modest competence is at least thinkable for one of his number; and, oddly enough, it is always to the weakest, the oldest and the least competent that he credits the possession. Not even Meary herself ever thought of "saving"; whereas you will observe that to the French field labourer—as to my hostess of the *Estaminet de l'Espérance*, who in her turn was the wisest French person I have ever spoken with—the first idea of the sou which he so sedulously hunts for in his sandier soil, is that of a thing to be "saved." It is the basis of some sort of investment in *Rentes, viagères* or otherwise, or it is the commencement of the purchase of some tiny patch of land, of a new cow or a first goat.

But short of a pig, which only too often does not pay its way, English "Meary" has no machinery of lucrative banking; she has only her stays or her

stocking up the chimney, just as her husband has only his baccy-box or the loose brick in the hearth floor. And improvements in the conditions of living have of late centuries limited themselves almost entirely to a cheapening of commodity in the case of the field labourer. He gets his food, which is now largely tinned or packet stuff, cheaper than he did, and for smaller sums he buys his comparatively shoddy garments; but his wages and his housing remain practically the same.

No doubt my Mearly and her neighbours are improvident: the cottages contain children and beer is drunk in the houses of call, and if men and women did without these two luxuries they might have reasonable sums in the savings-bank or nest-eggs that would fall to them from benefit societies when they reached the ages of fifty-five. It is no doubt appalling to think that whereas the average earning per agricultural family in England is fifteen shillings per week, the average expenditure upon beer (the figures are those of temperance reformers) should be eleven pence per family. Exactly reckoned out this means that, if it lived at so proportionately appalling a rate of expenditure, a family existing upon £1,000 per annum would spend £61 2s. 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ d. upon its pleasures—its clubs for the heads of the family, its wines, spirits, liqueurs, mineral waters for itself and its guests. For it must be remembered that the ale-house is the club, the only place of meeting save the corner of the churchyard, the only possibility

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

that the field labourer has of enjoying any kind of social life at all in almost every English village.

No doubt this $6\frac{1}{9}\%$ of unnecessary expenditure upon enjoyment would be impossibly high in any other English class; and of course, when we add to it the necessary expenditure upon the children that the field labourer so lavishly indulges in, we do attain to a picture of improvidence that is eminently disturbing to many people. But the fact seems to me to be that when a man has so little opportunity for pleasure or for rational investment as has the English field labourer, it is almost hypocritical to expect him to be only a little less abstemious than the angels of God or very much more than a man.

I have pondered a good deal upon this problem of the absence of earthly castles in the air; they are simply not to be found in the scheme of life of my good Meary and her neighbours. They do not seem to hope for any kind of Island of the Blest, and are agreeably surprised and a little ashamed if, when old age reaches them, their children support them. But a period of real rest or retiring is not for them. It does not come, at least, within their scheme of things. Of course, scattered over the countryside, we find old couples enjoying a modest leisure. But these are almost invariably people who have come across some unwonted stroke of luck. In a parish that I know very well, for instance, there were three such couples. But one pair had been gentlemen's servants, and

made a way for themselves by keeping a cow and drawing small pensions. Another pair had good children earning good money in several towns. The third had inherited a little money from a not very creditable source, and lived a hidden, odd life in the shadow of the deep boughs of a wooded hill in the midst of a random collection of squatters' huts that somehow they had come to own. In one they lived, in another they kept their pigs, in another they had a great number of bees. The whole little encampment was shut in by a very high quicken hedge, so that they seemed to pass all their days in a mysterious shadow, not very willing even to part with their honey as far as one could discover, for their garden gate was almost always padlocked, so that to knock at their front door it was necessary to find a hop-pole and to prod it from a distance. Then an upper window would open and a small wizened face look out.

It finally came to light, in the mysterious way in which these things will out in the London papers, that the little old man was the son of an informer. His father had betrayed a whole neighbouring village of smugglers seventy years before, and these, his descendants, a brother and sister, still lived on the blood-money. Where they had been in the interval before they came to B——, or why they should hide their heads in a country where the sons of notorious criminals flourish and are honoured, is a little of a mystery still ; but there they did live and there they

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

enjoyed such rest as is vouchsafed to anyone here. And it will be observed that all these three resting couples were the exceptions of the countryside.

The other one or two old people who there lived at home and in a measure of ease had parish relief. I have never come across a man or woman who had saved enough to live on when they grew too old to work, and I have never come across one who seriously thought of such a thing.

They take, the country people, their rests between work in snatches so intense that perhaps they scarcely rouse themselves to think of any longer spaces of doing nothing, for I know of no object, no symbol so absolutely typical of relaxation as the attitude of one of our field labourers after a hard day. If you will think of him sitting beside his tea-table, his head hanging a little, his legs wide apart as if to balance himself on a thing so fragile as a cottage chair, his hands, above all, open, immense and at rest, as if, having grasped many and heavy things, they would never again close upon a plough-handle or use-pole—if you will make a mental image, refining a little and idealising a little, you will be thinking of mankind utterly at rest. You will be thinking, too, of the mankind who does not consider either the future or the past—of the man whose nights are the walls between concrete periods of the mere present, whose days are each one a cell, shut off and unconnected, having no relation to the day which went before, and none to that which shall ensue after

the black oblivion of the coming night. For in which of those days, dominated by a real sun, overshadowed by real clouds, or swept by real and vast winds, shall they find leisure to formulate a scheme of life to provide against that figurative rainy day that the rest of the world so continually dreads? There is no time between bed and bed, and at night no lying awake. That, after all, is the improvidence of nature. For the ideas of making a career, of putting by against the decline of life, of retiring—these ideas are of a very modern, an artificial, growth. I am almost tempted to say that they have sprung up only with the growth of the Anglo-Saxon-Teutonic-industrial-commercialism that is Modernity. That is, naturally, a side-speculation; but what has always seemed to me an astonishing, an even astounding feature of most social comities is, not that the peasant should now be leaving the land, but that he should have been content to remain for so long the mere substratum of the body politic. For here we have a whole body of men controlling the one thing that is absolutely necessary to all other estates, controlling absolutely the one thing without which human lives cannot be lived.

“They must then,” a philosopher from another planet and another plane of thought would say, —“they must necessarily be the lords of the world. All other trades, professions, avocations, guilds, castes, crafts, or followings must come to them, suing upon bended knees for the mere stuff to keep their

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

ribs from sticking through their sides. They control, your field-workers, the food supply of your world; then they *must* control your world." And, indeed, it is odd to think that from the days of Pharaoh to the days when the rulers of Rome kept themselves in place and power by supplying bread *et circenses* to a town populace, from then to mediæval days, and from those days to these of transatlantic market manipulations, through all the mists of time to which annals and chronicles supply dimmed charts and landmarks, there has never been a wheat-corner of one kind or another that has been "engineered" or had its origin with the actual peasant—with the actual field-worker. There have, of course, been wars for the fixing of labourers' wages, as there was in England, and there have been Peasant Wars, as in Germany, but there has never been a case in which the peasant has shown himself aware of his actual power—his power to withhold food. Such class wars as he has waged—and in England there has only been the one—have been wars in which he used the weapons of the other classes, swords, billhooks, and whatever other primitive implements of steel he could lay hands to. But he has never used the most terrible weapon of all—he has never simply stayed his hand.

It is not, of course, very wonderful, though it is appalling to consider what would be the results of a universal peasants' "strike." But the peasant has hardly ever had a corporate self-consciousness; he

has certainly never “organised,” it is much, even, if he have so much as thought of his rather wretched circumstances. You get, for instance, his philosophy of keeping on going expressed in “Piers Plowman”—how many centuries ago—and in addition to it a consciousness of the bitterness of life; and in addition to that a belief that Providence, on the Last Day and for ever, shall give material recompense to those who suffered so long and so inarticulately:

“There the poor dare plead
And prove by pure reason
To have allowance of his lord
By the law, he it claimeth.”

And, joy that never joy had, he asketh of the rightful Judge. Since to the birds, beasts, and wild worms of the green wood that suffer grievously in winter, God sends summer that is their sovereign joy, assuredly and of pure reason God shall give to the poor toilers of the field, after their long winter of this world, an eternal summer. Something of this bitterness, tempered with the idea of retribution hereafter, may have remained to the peasant throughout the ages; but how different it is from the corporate consciousness of the other nearly indispensable crafts. How different it is from the spirit of the blacksmith's motto :—

“By hammer and hand
All Art doth stand.”

It was, I imagine, during the French Revolution

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

that some idea of this sort began to permeate the field labourer. But even then it was more a matter of individuals than of a body corporate. The print to which I have referred already is not, at any rate, in any form discoverable earlier than in a French version of 1782. It shows a man bearing upon his back many others: a king on the top, then, in a bunch, a soldier, a priest, a lawyer, a doctor, a merchant. Those who form the burden bear scrolls: "I govern all," "I fight for all," "I pray for all," "I cure all," "I sell for all," and the figure with its bowed head, like Atlas groaning beneath the weight of a world, exhibits the legend: "I work for all." I have seen versions of this print, redesigned with different attributes in wood engraving, in steel engravings, in chromolithograph or even copied by hand, all over Europe—in estaminets in La Vendée, in inns in Herefordshire, in farms in Kent, and in the *Kotten* of Westphalia. If it is not the charter, it is, this print, at least the claim to recognition of the worker on the soil. It was probably first designed in the France of 1782. Yet even in the England of a century and a quarter later the field labourer has not found any corporate or articulate means of intercommunication; he has not imagined any method of revenging himself on the classes above him. He has not, I mean, waged any war, claimed the land, or so much as "struck" in any vast numbers. What he *has* done has been simply to go over to the enemy. For, with the spread of education,

with the increase of communication, there has come not the determination to better the conditions of life in the country, but the simple abandonment of the land. It is, I think, a truism to anyone who knows the country, though I have found townsmen to deny it, that there are whole stretches of territory in England where a really full-witted or alert youth of between sixteen and thirty will absolutely not be found. I visited lately eighteen farms of my own neighbourhood, covering a space of about four miles by two miles, and on this amount of ground only five boys found employment. Four of these were below the average intelligence, and had at school not passed the fourth standard; the fifth was so "stupid" that he could not be trusted to do more than drive the milk-cart to and from the station. And of all the farm-labourers' families that I know well—some forty-six in number—only two have youths at home, and one of these has "something the matter with his legs." Of one hundred and twelve of other families that I know in a nodding way, not more than five have boys at work in the fields. Making a rough calculation of the figures as they have presented themselves to me, I find that just over five per cent. of the country-born boys I have known have stayed of their own free choice on the land. The public statistics for the whole of England are somewhat higher in this particular; but in the purely agricultural Midlands the standard of intelligence is somewhat lower, and in the North of England the living-in system still pre-

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

vails, and does for various reasons keep the young men in their places.

The figure among the girls is probably even more striking. A girl of moderately good looks or of an intelligence at all alert is almost unknown in many, many villages of England. I was much struck by the statement of a friend of mine the other day. A man of much intelligence and of unrivalled knowledge of country life, he had been spending a month watching the birds and small beasts of a certain countryside. He had covered a good deal of ground in that time, and at last he saw a pleasant and bright-looking girl. He had grown so weary of seeing only worn, stupid or dazed faces that he got off his cycle and remarked to her that he was glad to see that she at least was stopping in her own village.

"I!" she said with an accent of scorn; "I wouldn't stop in such a dull old hole if you gave me £10 a day! I'm visiting my parents for three days."

Yet the village in question was almost world-famous for its beauty, and her father's wages were rather high.

I do not for the moment want to extract any other meaning from this striking rural exodus than may attach to my own astonishment. But it *does* seem to me astonishing that this really downtrodden class should have given just this form to its protest. There has not, I mean, been any discoverable attempt worth the mention to fight the battle as a battle.

You do not anywhere find that the field labourer has attempted to raise the price that he receives from his employer,* nor do you find that the young people of the countrysides have ever made any attempt to brighten or to enhance the intellectual colourings of their lives. You do not find anywhere spelling bees, newspaper clubs, debating societies, or subscription dances. Yet there is no reason in the world why these things should not have been attempted. Nay more, all the old seasonal excitements of the country are dying out: the fairs, the May-day celebrations, the sparrow shoots, the bonfire clubs, even the very cricket clubs, which are subsidised, as a rule, "from above"—all the old merriments and "merry-neets" of the country have almost gone. In the course of the last four years I have seen the custom of May Barns and the village waits abandoned in a place where they have existed since its first houses were built. But no trace of any attempt to amuse

* You will find this most strikingly exemplified in the case of such temporary industries as that of hop-picking, where a whole village turns out together, and where, if anywhere, some sort of stand for better money might be made. "Strikes" do, of course, occur where there are many "foreigners" employed, but practically never where all the pickers are village people. The cottagers accept uncomplainingly the grower's wage, which is based upon his computation of what the price of hops may be expected to prove; of course, when I say the peasant has never struck, I do not forget the name of Mr. Joseph Arch. But from his day back to that of John Ball agitators and stack-burnings have been so comparatively rare that "never" remains a word sufficiently accurate for the uses of impressionism.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

themselves is to be found amongst the peasants of this countryside. The whole population of field workers is simply throwing down its tools; it is making no struggle for existence; it is simply going away in silence, without a protest and without a trace of listening to outward persuasions. And I know very well that if I live to be as old as my old Meary there will be no one like her to lift my basket over the stile.

And when I think of her, standing dun-coloured, smiling and square in the dusk of that sunken footpath, I am rather saddened. For, following her footsteps into the shadowy land that is the past, all the generation for whom she stood is going, now so fast.

There will be none to take their places. If any remain they will be the slow-witted: whilst she and those she stood for were merely unlettered, a thing very different. Yet, perhaps, we do wrong to regret that there should no longer be a whole world of our fellow-creatures pulled out of their natural shapes, stunted in their minds and leading lives dull and unlovely so that we may have certain æsthetic feelings gratified. No doubt in the scale of things the young shop-assistant, with her preserved figure, her gayer laugh, her brighter complexion, her courtships, her ideals and her aspiration for a villa in a row, with a brass knocker and an illustrated bible on the parlour table —no doubt the young shop-assistant is a better

IN THE COTTAGES

product of humanity than Meary, with her broad face, her great mouth, great hands, and cow-like heave of the shoulders. Nevertheless, I suppose that we must needs regret this passing. For, after all, it is a stage of the youth of the world that is passing away along with our own youth. It is the real heart of the country that is growing a little colder as our own hearts grow colder. It is one of the many things that our children—that our very adolescent nephews and nieces—will never know.

TOILERS OF THE FIELD



CHAPTER IV

TOILERS OF THE FIELD

I DO not know why in particular, and at this particular moment, there should come up in my memory a very rainy day. I was with three other men, driven in from work by the weather. We were idly watching the heavy showers that slanted across the triangular farmyard, driving down from the grey hollows and grey slopes of the downs behind, until the water dropped like curtains of beads from the eaves of the waggon lodge beneath which we sheltered.

I had been making a new strawberry bed, and a Falstaffian, shiny, shaven-faced scamp, by-named Sunshine because of his appearance, had been helping me. The shepherd, or, as we styled it, the looker, was flaying a sheep that hung from one of the tie beams of the open shed, and Hunt, a retired soldier, who also did a job of lookering on the farm, lank, ill-shaven and sallow, leant back against a mowing machine, and looked with red and malignant eyes across the slants of rain. He rubbed his wet nose

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

with the back of his hand and snarled out, "Now if I had my rights I shouldn't be here wet and sick feeling."

The shepherd—who had been a shepherd all his life on the one farm—made a slight incision with his knife, and drew the skin a shade lower on the red carcase.

"If we all had, we shouldn't none of us be," he said, with a laconic air.

Sunshine, who had run away from his wife in the next county, grunted merrily.

He himself would be sitting in Brock Castle drawing-room, and all the lands below the hill would be his, Hunt drawled viciously.

"And I'd have a tidy bit of land of my own, too," the shepherd said.

An aunt of his had died with property in the Chancery, Sunshine laughed, and, as luck would have it, I could make a similar claim.

"'Reckon no one would have to work if it wasn't for they lawyers," Hunt snarled; and the shepherd said that if a man in a black coat came along questioning him he kept very whist and quiet.

"Might be a parson, now," Sunshine argued.

Well, parsons and lawyers pig together, too, the shepherd answered. More than once he had taken a note to the vicarage, and seen parson and lawyer Hick having tea together. No—take his advice, and do not speak to a man with a white collar and a black coat.

He was of opinion that your own quality was as much as you could deal with : " Never you have no truck with strangers, or as like as not you'd sign away rights of yours you'd never heard of—and before you could say Jack Ploughman."

The retired soldier had been born on the wrong side of the blanket, I believe, for I could not otherwise make much of his wrongs, and a large liver, gained in India, seemed to sour him. But both Sunshine and the looker were of most contented kinds. Yet they told remarkable stories of the wrongs that they, their relations, or A., B. and C. of that countryside, had suffered at the hands of the local Quality. The shepherd's father, for instance, had owned a mud cottage and a good orchard—probably squatted land. One day, when he was about sixty-six, Squire C——k had come along and said, " Look here, old looker ; I'll build you a brick cottage and let you live in it till you die, roomy and comfortable, if so be when you die you will engage it comes to me." The old looker had consented ; and all the other squatters on the common had taken similar offers. But the old looker had died before the new cottage had been built two months, and out the old woman and her kids had had to turn.

" That was how the C——'s came into all the C——n property," the looker said.

Sunshine beamingly told the story of how his aunt had signed away her land in Chancery to a lawyer come all the way from the shires to get her name to a

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

paper when none of her nephews were by. And the shepherd capped it with the tale of old Jacky Banks, who had worked all his life on that very farm. He had had fifteen pounds a-year for forty years, never spent a penny of it except for baccy, and had it under his bed when he died, along with his watch. Well, he lived in, on the farm, and died in what was now the drawing-room. Old missus, who was a powerful old woman, lugging buckets about the stackyard and doing a man's work till she died, had taken all old Jacky's money from under his bed before his eyes were properly glazed, and his relations never saw a penny of it, nor the watch and chain neither.

I have frequently thought that the reputation for stupidity, for slowness of brain, for grossness of manner that the townsman accords to the field labourer must really arise from mere suspiciousness. The shepherd's advice to his friends to keep a shut head to people wearing black coats is very generally followed in the cottages. It must be remembered that the labourer cannot see any reason why his betters should want to talk with him. The only motive that he can accord to them is that of desiring to "get something out" of him. He has heard of land-grabbing, of land in Chancery; he has known of cases innumerable in which the small tenant-farmer, the three-hundred-acre man, has over-reached his labourers. His cottage doors are beset by pedlars of sorts—watch pedlars, pension tea pedlars, illustrated Bible pedlars, and the agents of foreign lotteries. All these people

wear black coats and speak with specious and silky accents of gentility. I remember, too, walking along a dark road from the station with a youngish girl of the scullery-maid type. She chatted amiably as long as I was invisible, but when the light of a carriage fell upon me she looked at me with startled eyes, uttered, "Why, you're a *gentleman!*!" and took to her heels. For in the eyes of the cottage mothers there is only one reason why a gentleman should wish to talk to a cottage girl.

And the speculation has sometimes occurred to me, too, what impression the voice, the accent and the language of the more instructed class must make upon the ears accustomed to broader and harsher sounds. I remember discussing a certain rather charming lady with an old labourer, and he said—

"Why, she was very nice in her ways, but she'd a pernickety way of speaking that *ah* couldn't stomach much."

If, in fact, brogues, dialects and dropped "h's" affect the educated ear disagreeably, must not soft and delicate inflections of vowel sounds cause a vague or a very definite feeling of unrest? I do not imagine that a labourer can ever feel really at ease with that particular kind of foreignness. It cannot be home-like. Most country speech nowadays is tinged and coarsened by the horrible sounds of the cockney language, but it was not always so. I remember, years ago, going to order a waggon at a new dismal-looking villa residence, the property of a self-

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

made man. The man himself came to the door. He was over ninety, tall, straight, with faded blue eyes, very white hair and trembling hands; but his voice and accent were charming and flute-like. He said, for instance—

“De harses beien’t home from plovin’ most deas till nün.”

The words look grotesque in print, but all the sounds were very clear and precise. And indeed with the very old people of all countrysides it is generally the same. They give the impression of speaking, very correctly and with great self-respect, a dead language.

So that for these and many reasons the person of quality, the strange squire, the Bible pedlar, the parson, or the dog-licence man, are suspect. All these wearers of clothes not weather-beaten and soil-stained, all these speakers with unhomely voices, all these people who have too ready a flow of words to be easily trusted—all these English foreigners, in fact, are individuals to whom it is wisest to keep a “shet hed.” You can gain nothing from them, they may be after some vague property of yours. I think, really, that the attitude of the field-labourer towards his betters is that of, say, a Dutch colonial farmer towards the early diamond prospectors. There may be diamonds, gold, petroleum, or Heaven knows what upon his property; who knows what these strangers might make out of the unknown mysterious possibilities?

I heard, for instance, the other day of a quite authentic Chancery case. Here an old labourer, who had served with distinction in the Army, was really the heir to some property. His children had employed lawyers, but the old man obstinately refused to give them any assistance. Once he went to the solicitor's office with his medals and birth certificate as means of identification, but having surrendered them he sat all night upon the doorstep for fear they should be taken out of the office and sold. Now, having recovered them, he sits upon them continually in his hooded chair, he absolutely refuses to swear any affidavit or to give any testimony in any court of law. And there the case remains at a stand-still. This, of course, is an extreme instance, but it is as it were a symptom of a very widespread disease.

For it must be remembered that the field labourer has not *any* reason for courting the society of his betters. He cannot by any possible means rise in the social scale. A successful draper will become a knight and build a manor-house, but there is no kind of "success" open to the usual farm labourer. Hence he has no reason for snobbishness and "knows his place." A lady of my acquaintance once invited her wood-reeve to sit down to tea with her. He gave as a reason for refusing that—

"You don't put a toad in your waistcoat pocket."

Perhaps for that very reason the field labourer has as a rule much less of class hatred than his town cousin. You do not hear, beside the ale-house ingle, the same

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

diatribes against the rich that you will in a workman's train; you will not, if you are one of the rich, have such approaches as you may make met with an ostentatious defiance. I *have* been met in the country by "shut heads," but have never been harangued for my lewdness or luxurious habits as has time and again happened to me at the hands of town labourers. The nearest I have come to it in the country was once when I asked my way of a statuesque old woman in a lilac sun-bonnet. She misdirected me, and when, returning an hour later, I saw her and reproached her, she said—

" Well, you idle chaps has nothing better to do than to waste time. How did *I* know ye really wanted to go to L—?"

The feeling expressed in the lines I have quoted from *Piers Plowman* does undoubtedly still exist. Once I took one end of the table at an underwood sale dinner in an inn barn. The churchwardens had been brought in; I had made the best of ladling out rum punch with a ladle that had a George II. guinea inlaid in its bowl (and you have no idea how difficult it is to ladle punch into thirty tumblers without spilling a quantity. The quill-like silver stem quivers in your hand and you feel that sixty or a hundred eyes are fixed upon your fingers). The smoke from the pipes ascended to the rough rafters of the barn; repletion mellowed the talk of cants of ash-saplings and of chestnut wattlegates; we had eaten roast goose and plum pudding with brandy sauce; we

were a matter of ninety buyers, all labourers, except for three farmers, the auctioneer and myself. Then songs were called for; ten or a dozen men set themselves to press one of the farmers for *Old Joe's Wedding Day*. The farmer, a man who worked himself, fat, hard, bullet-headed and inscrutable, sat with twinkling eyes, sunk deep in his chair as if he heard and saw nothing of his persuaders. Suddenly in the midst of their clamour a high, clear, thin sound thrilled through the air. Coming as it did from his lips which hardly appeared to move, it produced a most extraordinary impression, as if a bull had spoken with the voice of a canary.

But the next favourite, or perhaps the real favourite, since Farmer Files had a kind of official position, was a fanatical-looking man called Hood, whom I had never seen before. He rose without any pressing. Tall, scraggy, long-necked, bearded, and with flashing eyes, he reminded me of some furious Hebrew prophet or of some Solomon Eagle. He had impassioned gestures of claw-like hands when the whites of his eyes would show. He recited a piece of verse called, I think, "Christmas Day." It was full of the miseries rather than the wrongs of the poor. Because he had a real dramatic gift the piece was moving to listen to.

The rate-collector harassed a poor family—Hood glared round the room; a keeper unjustly accused the house-father of stealing goose eggs—he thundered with one hand on the trestle table and a glass fell to the floor; finally the bailiff came in for rent whilst the thaw

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

drip was trickling through the thatch—and the man's lowered voice and gloomy eyes seemed to cast a real shadow of tragedy on the faces of his hearers.

For me at least the rest of the poem spoiled the effect, since a long-lost son from Australia came back at that very moment, and after having taken the oppressed family to the inn for a square Christmas meal, he bought the house of the oppressive landlord and settled his parents in it. That, of course, was the retributive joy of the *Piers Plowman* poem. Joy that never joy had, had come into more than his own even on earth, and whatever one's regret for the spoilt art of the piece (the agony really *had* been skilfully piled up), one would not grudge the hard-faced peasant listeners their touch of idealism and softening. The wood sale is the great event of the year in these parts.

But the reciter evidently had *his* feelings, his grim humour. For as he sat down amidst violent sounds of feet and of hands on the table, he said—

“I reckon, tho', when *they* got into their big house, they'd send chaps for three months to Maidstone along of a turnip, just the same as if they'd never been poor.”

It was not, I mean, in his mind a song against the rich, but merely one against the bitterness of things. He seemed to be uttering in his own sardonic way those inimitable French words, “*Cela vous donne une fière idée de l'homme.*” But, indeed, it has always

TOILERS OF THE FIELD

seemed to me that the countryman is more of a man of the world than his offshoot in the towns. He has a far greater knowledge of life.

The faces of town houses are inscrutable masks ; class and class pass each other's streets but never penetrate the rooms. The town labourer relies for his knowledge of his social superiors upon the relatively vile gossip of the Press. The superior townsman has even less opportunity for really observing the lives of the poorer of the working classes.

In the country the social barriers are more rigid, but the peasant really does know something of what goes on in the great houses and may comment upon them after his lights ; and after *his* light the country gentleman may know and comment upon the lives of his upholders. Life in the country has, in short, a great solidarity and a great interdependence, and with this greater knowledge comes, as a rule, a greater tolerance. This must, indeed, be the case where one's ideas of life are founded upon a knowledge of that life.

But, of course, along with the easy tolerance of the man of the world there goes a larger morality. I know a Cabinet Minister whom in Town one would never suspect of robbing the public funds, yet when he had a part of his park re-fenced he calmly caused the palings, where they abutted on the high road, to be set five feet further out upon the roadside turf. Thus he stole one acre-and-a-half of public land ; and the local

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

peasantry rather applauded the act. It was, they said, part of what one expected of the gentry.

I was talking, too, to a village carpenter the other day about a notorious financier who had made a notorious failure. He had bought the local estate from Lord A. and had employed this carpenter to the tune of £150. Of this the carpenter had received 2s. od. in the pound. Said the red-bearded, pleasant carpenter—

“Well, Mr. P. was a gentleman. Only he got among these great folks and they led him wrong.” A rough diamond but a gentleman. Why, Lord A. used to give only five pounds to the school fund and five pounds to the club. Mr. P. he gave fifteen to each. He was a gentleman.

When I objected that he had made £135 out of the carpenter to give thirty to these charities, he only answered—

“Oh, you expects *that!* But Mr. P. was a gentleman. He gave fifteen pounds where Lord A. only gave five!”

If you are a countryman you do indeed “expect that,” because you are a man of the world. But for the same reason you are not strictly honest yourself, you repay yourself in kind. At one time I lived two miles away from a pillar-box, and on my daily journeys to the post I used to make a halfway house of a certain lonely one-floored damp cottage. There dwelt in it an aged couple. The man had had eleven children by a former wife, and the woman twelve by a first husband;

they had married at the ages of seventy-nine and seventy, because two blankets are warmer on one bed than one a-piece on two. The old woman was intensely active, an indefatigable maker of mushroom catsup, which she carried up hill and down dale to sell, and a most lugubrious and whining beggar. But old S. was the most venerable person I have ever seen. He had a high bald head, from which there flowed silky white locks, an aquiline nose, a full voice and a sort of quaver that would have done credit to any ecclesiastic. Seated in his chair beside his duck's-nest grate in the low room, the walls of which were covered with black-and-white memorial cards and glass rolling pins as thickly as is the side wall of a cathedral with votive tablets, he would mouth out noble sentiments such as "Honesty is the best policy," and stretch a quivering hand across the square opening of the fire-place. He appeared then like one of those venerable patriarchs that one sees in wood-cuts illustrating the *Cottar's Saturday Night* or early Victorian pietistic works. And indeed he was a fine old fellow.

Yet when I gave him a job of picking up potatoes for me and overpaid him handsomely because his appearance was so venerable, he would beg me to tell the neighbours that he only did it out of friendship, since he was "on his club;" or he would relate some such anecdote as the following:—

"I was a-gooing up the Knoll Hill one evening when what does I see leein' in the roadway but a

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

golden guinea and a broken stick with some drops of blood on it. ‘Hullo, my fine fellow,’ says I, ‘theer’s been some bad work here, so up you comes into my baccy-box.’ And off I goes into the woods as quick as quick, for why, if the owner had come back, he might have claimed it of me.”

I do not mean to say that these instances of dishonesty are striking or even singular. Naturally there might be cited numbers of cases of sharp practices that would bring the hearts of countrysides up to a level in these matters with the bars of the towns where the confidence trick flourishes; but old S—— was a little above the average of his fellows in the precepts, the appearance and even the practice of morality. Yet here we find him swindling his club—which is the meanest of crimes really, since it tells against one’s fellows in poverty—and we find him taking advantage of what he supposed to be a crime. He told the anecdote with a twinkle of the eye and that fine preaching inflexion of the voice which goes with the statement that honesty is the best policy, that upright and manly inflexion of the voice which so amply conveys the idea that Providence is on the side of the speaker.

Upon the whole the most honest person that I have ever really known in the country was W——n. He was a man of about forty, grizzled, brown, gray-eyed and altogether pleasant in the face. He had an air of pathetic weariness too, and I really liked him very much, and have spent many hours talking to him whilst

TOILERS OF THE FIELD

he worked for me. In a rough-and-ready way he could do anything from managing a steam-plough to indoor painting and glazier's work. He has thatched a stable for me, planted an asparagus bed, made my book-shelves, and, though he can neither write nor cypher, he has managed my coverts of underwood and kept the accounts to the last farthing. He is extraordinarily hard-working.

Once when I was making alterations in an old farmhouse, piercing a door through an outside wall and opening up an ingle, I carried W——n from his own village and set him to these tasks. I went to bed myself one night thoroughly worn out and offered W——n a bed too. He preferred to get on with his job, and I left him crouching by the hearth, his hand half up the chimney and one candle burning on a brick in the desolate dining-room. All through the night I could hear, when I woke, W——n's cold chisel hammered against the hard mortar or the rumble of bricks as they fell in the chimney. And when I went down in the morning to get him a cup of tea, there was W——n, the ingle completely opened out, the man with his head on one side, the chisel in one hand and the mallet in the other, sitting on a pile of old bricks, reddened from hair to boot soles with brick-dust, and fallen into a light sleep, so that when I stumbled over a brick his hammer as if automatically struck the cold chisel and knocked away a flake of mortar.

He did not make the least fuss about his hard

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

night, and did not even ask for overtime pay. It was all in his day's work. And upon the whole, thinking of the way he must have kept on going through the hours that to me would have been intolerably long and solitary, I felt proportionately ashamed of myself and respectful to W——n. I mean that I felt that he was a better man at his work than I at mine.

I would trust him with untold gold, and indeed I do still trust him with sums of money that for him must be very considerable. But I am quite certain that, though he will fight for my interest with all sorts of builders, seed-chandlers or market-gardeners, he will pick up inconsiderable trifles about my house, little things that I shall not miss, cracked boots, old caps from cupboards under the stairs—all sorts of things that I would give him with all the joy in the world. And he tolerated the fact that his "missus," who used to do our washing, would fail to return an occasional handkerchief or baby's petticoat (W——n like all his improvident brethren has an immense family of tiny children). "Women *are* like that," he would say between puffs of his pipe. His grey eyes would twinkle pleasantly when he recounted the small peculations of his mates, the larger dishonesties of the builders whom he knew very well, or the land-grabbing of the Cabinet Minister of whom I have spoken. That was his world as he saw it, and W——n was a man of the world.

He had been a waggoner's mate as a boy, he had

TOILERS OF THE FIELD

been a plough hand when the marsh took more acres of seed turnips than now, alas, are to be seen in all England. When the plough failed as a profession he had migrated to Margate, which was in the throes of building a new suburb, and he had worked as bricklayer, plasterer, paper-hanger, painter, plumber and layer-down of lawn grass in a whole estate of new villas. When the "slump" in the building trade came he returned to B——n. He worked for the farmers at hedging, at lookering, at hop-tending, at haying when work was plentiful in the summer. In the winter he would take a contract for dykeing from the War Office or would make rather good money by working in his own covert of wood, which he bought each year at the Michaelmas wood sales. He kept a pig or two and a few fowls, and did upon the whole fairly well.

Here is, in short, a very proper man, an all-round one, and one very fairly well contented. He did not want to return to town life, where the fact that he was illiterate hampered him a little. In a vague way he was conscious that there was no kind of career open to him at all. He would have liked to have got a small bit of land, and it worried him a little that this was absolutely impossible. Or he would have liked to have been able to work all the year round in the woods. And indeed W——n is the best worker in the underwood that I have ever come across, and had a way of making the best penny out of the fourteen different kinds of poles and withies and wattles—a way

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

that when I did employ him in the woods I found singularly lucrative. He had, in fact, a certain administrative gift, and although absolutely without resources he could always manage to raise the fifteen or twenty pounds that were needed for his Michaelmas transaction.

W——n was a good man ; perhaps he was the best of his district, or perhaps it was only because of his handsome, saddish, brown face that I took to him. But if I had not chosen him I could have had twenty or fifty others in that part nearly as good workmen, practically as hard-working and practically as honest and with practically as much resourcefulness and business ability. It is probably the underwood that keeps this goodish type of worker in these parts, since wood-work calls for a large amount of intelligence, handiness with tools and ability to keep out of debt over the year-end, though you must needs be in debt for nine months out of the year. But given these characteristics it pays well and, upon the whole, surely.

For these reasons I liked W——n's countryside better than any other I have known before or since, and indeed, with its deep folds of the hills, its little jewel-green, dark and misty fields between tangled coppices, with its small cottages, its aged farms and its high and deep woods covering the ground like a mantle for further than the eye could reach from any height ; with its good, nourishing, greasy mud, its high hedgerows and its spreading neglected small orchards, it remains for me my particular heart of the country.

TOILERS OF THE FIELD

The cottager there is of a good type; the cottages are old, rat-ridden, clay-floored, but the fires are well tended, the wood-smoke pleasant, the furniture old and substantial as a rule, the bread heavy, the butter good, the pork fat, the tea strong, the cheese stings the tongue.

These things mean a good deal in the psychology of a people, and the people there, having been much left to themselves, and having come of a riotous, smuggling, harum-scarum stock, were independent, resenting intrusions, and willing only to take you at their own particular valuation. What was curious to me were the "bad" villages of the neighbourhood. There were two of these, C— Street and the Freight, set at each end of the united villages of A—n and B—n. It was difficult indeed to say why these were "bad"; but in each of them the people were darker-browed, squalider, more furtive-eyed. A family resemblance ran from cottage to cottage; drunkenness was certainly unusually frequent and various other forms of vice were said to characterise them. I do not know about that, but certainly no decent family, however pressed for housing, would willingly move into either C— Street or the Freight. Thus their populations were constantly recruited, whenever a cottage fell vacant, by families lacking in self-respect.

I have heard this singular phenomenon accounted for by a supposed difference of race between village and village. In the case of the celebrated strip of country, about forty miles by seven, which is usually

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

accounted the “worst” in England, race might possibly operate; but I am fairly certain that it was not so in either the Freight or C— Street. It was not a matter of position either that gave them their peculiar similarities, since one lies well in the marsh, and the other is high on the ridge—one is composed of rather squalid modern brick cottages, the other of quite decent little old houses, so that it was hardly to be set down to insanitary surroundings; nor yet could it be laid to the charge of overcrowding, since in neither village is there more than one family to be found in any cottage, nor has any one family more than three children. I am personally inclined to put it down to the absence of a clergyman in either parish.

For—and being no Churchman, I may say it without fear—the influence of a clergyman in a village may be very potent for good in the cleanliness, the sobriety, and, above all, in the treatment of the children. He acts to some extent as a former of public opinion. He is frequently narrow, bigoted, and short-sighted; he is almost invariably quite out of touch with the mental and spiritual needs of his parishioners, and, as a rule, he is regarded by them with either suspicion or good-natured tolerance; but one does notice a distinct deterioration in parishes where the clergyman is lazy or dishonest. And the deterioration is not in morals alone, but in the feeling of solidarity in the parish itself. Where he does not keep the accounts of the club, administer

the charities, take part in the parish meetings—where, in fact, he does not do his best to be the centre and to organise *some* sort of social life, social life seems to die out altogether. But the really good parson—the man who does his best after his own lights or after the simple traditions expected of him, that man may do an almost infinite amount towards making his parishioners hold together. The mere fact that he establishes and keeps going little clubs and organisations—silly as they may be from any high intellectual standpoint—brings the men and women of the cottages out from their homes. A Cottage Garden Show Society is a small thing, but it will need two or three “officers” of sorts, and these officers will come together on a ground just slightly different from that of the churchyard corner or the potato field. It enables the men to meet each other under newer and slightly wider aspects.

In a sense the clergyman is the only organiser that a village is certain to possess. There *may* be men of ability among the cottagers, but they will have to fight for any position of authority. The clergyman has it already; and, given a certain tact and a certain goodness of heart, he may go to the grave with a good deal of affection and leave an easy task to his successor, however incapable. On the other hand, a really dishonest clergyman may do an infinite deal of mischief; for the parson is almost always regarded with suspicion by very keen eyes, and once a clergyman runs, say, into debt, flagrantly

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

and without the excuse of a poor stipend or a large family, an angel from God would find it an almost impossible task to persuade the inhabitants of that parish that there is ever any good in the clergy—or in human nature at all. And that effect will outlast the efforts of generations of his successors.

From the point of view of faith, I believe that the Church of England is absolutely out of touch with the field labourer in Southern England. Its creed is unknown, its ritual meaningless, and the language of its services so antiquated as to be almost incomprehensible. I had in my service a girl from a very decent labourer's family—a girl of very much more than the average quickness of natural intelligence. Our vicar heard that she had not been confirmed, and after having given her what he deemed the necessary instruction, he presented her at the next confirmation. A week afterwards I happened to ask her if she would care to go abroad with the family. She declined very resolutely, and upon my asking her why, she said, "Because if the ship sank the fishes would eat my soul." And upon going through the confirmation manual that she had got by heart I discovered that she understood hardly seventy-five per cent. of its words. Thus, in such a sentence as, "Here the priest shall approach the altar," she understood only the words "here," "the," and "shall."

My dear friend Meary once brought me a Bible that another cottager wished me to value for her.

She said: "I don't believe it can be real old, because it's got the New Testament in it."

The other day I heard a very intelligent grave-digger say: "I wonder Jesus Christ made so many damp places whilst He was making the earth." He was also the parish clerk, and the words were said quite reverently.

Talking to me in my garden one day, W——n said to me—

"I don't blame the parsons for what they tell us. They're taught by the folks above them when they're young—just as that tree there was crook'd when *it* were young." But he did not see how he could be called to believe that three Gods are one, or that if he were made in God's own image he could be troubled with toothaches as he was. And if so be God did make man in His own image, then the man's as good as his master.

I am not, of course, indicting the creed of the Church, but I am convinced, as far as my own observation will convince me, that that creed is very little brought home and very little explained to the field labourer. He needs something extremely simple, something extremely comforting and something taught in the plainest language. It is in very few parishes that he gets it. And, upon the whole, I should say that the chapels are nearly as far out of touch with the field labourer as the churches. Thus, with his long hours for introspection, his frequent readings of the Bible, and the fragments of church or chapel language that he has been able to make

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

his own, the field labourer moves across the acres, half heathen, and patching together religions, superstitions, and cosmogonies, each man very much for himself. I remember hearing the reply of a priest abroad to a poor woman who said that she found it very difficult to believe in the doctrine of Papal Infallibility. He said, "That is a matter for the theologians. Try, my child, to believe as much of it as you can."

And for the English field labourer, most of the articles of the Christian faith are matters for the theologians; and the theologian is as much outside his world as is the classical scholar or the spiritualist. The spiritualist would indeed be nearer the needs and creeds of the field labourer if he had any means of reaching him, since beliefs in manifestations of that particular kind of other-worldliness die very hard in the rural districts. In fact, I doubt if they decrease at all except in so far as the populations decrease. I have never myself taken much interest in these particular phenomena, but I am personally acquainted with two witches, and I can hardly think of a wood or a farmyard which has not its ghost, if one will take the trouble to search for it. At times in country districts one will run up against odd reluctances on the part of the peasantry. Thus, I have found it impossible to get an errand done for me along a certain road, or a man has for no obvious reason been more than reluctant to dig a certain patch of ground, to cut

down a certain tree, or to doctor one of his cows. And, by going tactfully into the matter, I have discovered that a headless horseman rides down that road, an evil fate overtakes the digger in that ground, the tree is one in whose branches there lives the spirit of a suicide, or the cow had been overlooked.

These things do not play much visible part in the life of the heart of the country-side; but there they are. They exist; they are factors of the daily round; they are as much part of the field labourer's life as are, say, the stars, the rain that follows on the sound of the sea heard inland, the legends of creation, or the price of crops. They are part of the nature of things—nay, they are even more, since he regards them as an ultimate resource. When his doctor, his vet., his parson, or his prayers have failed, he may always discover where there dwells a white witch or a wise man who for five sixpences placed on a table in the form of a cross will do him a world of good, or tell him at least whether his cow or his old woman will get through this time. I met last Saturday (and shall meet next) a young, dull-looking farm-labourer who has achieved some remarkable cures where doctors have been given up; and, for the matter of that, I know where to go to procure a piece of written paper that, worn round the neck, will prove a most potent love philtre.

The field labourer is tacit in front of these things. There they are; you may use them or laugh at them

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

till you need to use them ; but you do not much question them. Why should you ? Parson tells you one thing, and papers and people who don't like parsons tell you something else. Your problem is how best to keep all on going till you drop. Different men differ a lot—from Portuguese to Members of Parliament and men from the Shires. It takes all sorts to make a world, and some men must needs know more than others. Have not all of us seen old Ned Post, who has been in the Indies and learnt how to keep his head in a basin of water for ten minutes without being a farthing the worse, which is more than you or I or old Squire Williams could do ? And old Ned Post is nothing to look at. So the field labourer keeps an open mind.

Dyspepsia is a scourge of the cottagers, and most men have had long periods of hunger that cloud the thinking faculties a little. I have been soundly taken to task by a critic of a former book of mine for quoting the words of a doctor. He said that the town street-arab had a stronger grip on life than the field labourer. But although I am not sure, I think that the doctor was right. For, as far as I have seen, the field labourer dies very easily once he is ill. His diet is atrocious ; it is atrociously cooked : his cottage, as a rule, is insanitary, draughty, damp, and too small. His work is too hard, his opportunities for mental relaxation pitifully too restricted. Except for his open-air life—which causes a great deal of over-exposure—he has very little to keep him in either mental or

bodily health. And I do not really see why he should want to live.

I was much impressed the other day by the death of a man who had worked on a certain farm all his life. He was stalwart, bearded, hook-nosed, and his figure, with a broad felt hat which he always wore tied on with a handkerchief round crown and chin, had been to me always a familiar feature of that country-side. One saw him pottering about among the sheep of distant fields or stamping across the mixen in the heavy rains. His face was fresh-coloured, and he had a sort of saturnine humour, a taciturnity of his own. One day we heard, "N—— is taken ill."

I went to see him. It was odd, his brown face and grizzled beard peeping out from the white bed-clothes, and he said, grimly, "Well, mister, I'm going to die."

His wife set up a wail from the scullery—"He's going to die! he's going to die!"

There was absolutely nothing the matter with him save for a touch of chill to the liver. But, standing beside him, I felt really that there was no reason why he should make an effort to get better. The rain fell dismally outside, yellow damson leaves stuck themselves on to his window-panes with each gust of wind, the hills were grey, the road was grey. What exact reason could I give him for getting up and facing the eight months of cold, wet, and toil that must be his? I did, of course, my best to induce

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

him to make an effort; but you cannot make bricks without straw. He was dead within the week.

I have here done my best to render my particular impression of the field labourer, because it seems to me that he is the basis, the bed-rock upon which the social fabric of our country-sides must rest. If there be a heart of the country, he is the heart of the heart. He is the stuff from which we have all developed, and to him, no doubt, we shall all return sooner or later. He seems to me to be, in fact, just much of a make with his fellows, not much better and certainly not at all worse than his neighbours of whatever class. Of course every one of us will meet with field labourers who are nearly brutes; I have met many. But the general impression left after much dealing with him is not that of association with a low type. Rather it is that of pleasure and of admiration. For such virtues as he has, he has in spite of his environment; his vices are nearly all the product of his hard life. You cannot expect much more than a decent friendliness, sobriety and openness of mind from a man whose function in life is no more than to keep on going; and the wonder is how he does it. Yesterday I had a man in to do some weeding for me, and whilst he worked I talked with him. He was a Yorkshireman who had been a stonemason of the higher class, one of those men who make good money by imitating mediæval work for the restorations in old churches. But the stone-dust had injured his lungs, and he had come south to find a better climate and purely out-

of-door work. Going about among the field labourers, he said, made him think precisely that, he could not make out how they did it. He never went near a public - house, he never bought himself any new clothes, he lived with the utmost frugality, like a canny Yorkshireman, yet he could not make both ends meet. Yet these fellows always seemed to have two-pence for a glass of beer, though they had wives and families. He uttered his opinion with a rather unctuous and odious tone, as a condemnation of the beer-drinking that he was above. But the tribute was, to my mind, none the less striking.

And there, for me, the agricultural labourer stands. He is, after all, Every-man, this final pillar of the state, this back-bowed creature who supports king, soldier, priest, merchant and the rest. And if I desire to have a good idea of my kind, *une fière idée de l'homme*, I think of him. He is the raw material from which we draw, the mud from which our finer clays are baked. It takes all sorts to make a world, and in the cottages, precisely, you find all the sorts that are necessary. You will find unlettered men who have in them the makings of kings, of priests, of merchants, and of soldiers. They seem as it were to be resting there beneath the thatches, on the clay floors, to be waiting for the call of Destiny, for the odd flick from the fingernail of Fate that shall send them, in the persons of their seed, up the ladders to the highest ranges. And to these cottages there shall descend in good time the children of our rulers, the seed of our mighty

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

ones ; just as to-day, driving carriers' carts, speeding the plough, carrying buckets to pig-styes, you will find men bearing the great names ; Fiennes, Talbots, Howards, Spencers, Darcys, all are there, all came from there, and shall no doubt once more go out thence into the world.

For the real heart of the country is the cottage, the image being not far-fetched but exact, since in this dwelling the sons of men learn temperance, endurance, caution, tolerance, since here they are hardened, strengthened, tempered and rendered tough. The cottage is, as it were, positively the heart, since it sends forth the aspiring drops of blood that go to make up the body politic, since it receives them always again at last, purifies them always once more, and always once more sends them forth upon the eternal round of ups and downs that is the history or the families of mankind.

UTOPIAS



CHAPTER V

UTOPIAS

“ D——D is the farm of T. W. L——n, the sportsman and financier.

“ It consists of 800 acres of made land . . . Though of comparatively small acreage . . . for perfection of equipment it is approached by no farm on the earth ; its livestock is the best that experts can select and money can buy. The D——d stables contain the best trotting-bred sires in the world, the champion large harness - horse and champion small harness-horse, the champion saddle-horse and the champion pony. Its herd of Jersey cattle is headed by the best Jersey bull in existence ; its kennels of English bulldogs, Blenheim, Prince Charles, and Ruby spaniels are equal, if not superior, to any in the world.

“ D——d represents the outlay of £400,000 spent, and it is run at an annual outlay of £40,000 over receipts. . . . It is lighted by electricity, the lights, by the way, being specially worthy of notice from the manner of their hanging — they are attached to the

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

trunks of the trees, and the wires leading to the lights are hidden under a profusion of ivy and roses. . . . The grounds are piped for water under high pressure, and the ugly stand-pipe has been elaborated into a picturesque look-out tower with a peal of bells that strike the hours and play the Westminster chimes at sunrise and sunset. The buildings are heated throughout by hot water, the stables have ceiling coils that give a temperature of 50° in the coldest weather. The roads are macadamised and are lighted by electric lamps at intervals of 200 feet. . . . That the scale of D—d may truly be called grand is apparent from the next building, the riding-school, 200 feet × 130 feet, or larger than the Agricultural Hall at Islington, England. . . . The stable for farm horses is 200 feet long and contains a carpenter's shop. . . .”

This castle is not in Spain, nor is it the dream of some farmer worried to death with the problem of making both ends meet where everything that goes off his farm walks upon its own legs; nor yet is it the ideal work-house of the one field-labourer who has had leisure for ideals. But perhaps it *is* what we are coming to.

I copy these passages—they are not the most profuse—from one of the more respectable of our country journals, where D—d is cited as a model of what things should be if Great Britain were an agricultural Utopia.

And of course, except for the superlatives, the “no farm on earth,” “the best that money can buy,” and so

on, the description of any one of these marvels might come from some English valley or park-land. Lord B——'s famous breed of Wensleydales might be as sumptuously housed; Mr. C——'s prize Berkshires might have floors to their sties of marble as costly; or the cow-stalls of the Duchess of W——'s short-horns may be as well warmed as those of D——d. But at D——d there are all these things together; and there is everything else as well; and D——d and the electric lights, and the trees, and the flowers (Mr. L——n, the owner, was the proprietor of the world-shaking L——n carnation, which sold for \$30,000)—all these things, all this fairy palace, sprang up in a barren land in three years' time. It was a leisure creation of Mr. T. W. L——n, whose real work is “captaining the fight against the S—— Trust, the greatest combination of capital the world has seen.”

Of course it is really only the old story over again. All over England, all over Europe, there are the great and mellow houses. They confront the evening skies from hill tops, or in sleepy vale-lands they take the luxurious rays of the sun. And most of them rose in the same way, Blenheim having been built as a leisure work whilst Marlborough was “captaining the fight” in the Low Countries against “the greatest combination” of chicanery and of troops the world had seen. And whether gained by the sword of knights or the reed pens of diplomatists, whether the growth of ages in the hands of dominant families, or whether they sprang up at the biddings of single

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

geniuses of one kind and another, our cis-Atlantic castles and houses are not intimate products of the soil. They were not based on fortunes made by the plough and crook; they were bought with money made on the battle-field or the back stairs of palaces, with money earned at sea or in the plains of the Punjab. It is this fact that makes D——d, which of course is in Massachusetts, so profoundly uninteresting. It is not a new creation; it is not showing the way to anything; it is simply imitation by a man who has money enough for *anything*. Mr. T. W. L——n might just as well have spent his gold upon having made for himself a crown of radium.

On the other hand, so vast is the problem of the country, so deep do its ramifications go that it is really only the spirit of Mr. L——n's enterprise that one can cavil at—the spirit that prompts an “annual outlay of £40,000 over receipts.” For what is the use of this expenditure? It is on a par with that of a Roman Emperor who might feed his horses on gilded corn. As well give his cows marble baths; no knowledge is gained. Yet the problem of the best stabling for cows is intimately interesting to the social reformer, since it must have a bearing upon the whole question of land tenure. If you cannot afford the best sort of stable for a cow out of a small holding, you must rule cow-keeping out of the profitable pursuits of the small holder, and to that extent you must discount the possibility that the small holding will prove the basis of your agricultural Utopia. Or

again, a princely expenditure upon electric apparatus may undoubtedly have its uses as leading a forlorn hope. For certain thinkers hold that the whole problem of the fight between the stock-breeder and the butcher might be solved by giving cold-storage into the hands of the farmer. In that case the stock-breeder could fatten his beasts just when and how he would, according to his district, his climate, the nature of his soil, the state of his seed crops, and so on. And having his fatted beast he could slaughter it when it suited him and store his carcases in his refrigerator, selling his meat to a chastened and humbled butcher. In that way the farmer would secure the bulk of the price that the consumer pays for his meat, and the middleman would be brought to his knees.

That, at least, is the contention of the cold-storage theorist. Yet how is it to be tested unless *some* farmer capitalist make the experiment and actually finds out whether the idea is financially as sound as it is alluring. It is for these reasons that, in face of a rural question as saddening as it is bewildering, one regrets the belauding of displays like that of Mr. T. W. L——n. It is as if one should, in the days when Arthur Young was trying to improve farming, hold up the Trianon châlets as models to an admiring world of agriculturists. Heaven forbid, at the same time, that I should seem to decry the expenditure of the millionaire who built D——d in three years. For perhaps D——d itself *is* the solution of the problem.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

Perhaps it is to be the fate of the country—of the English country at least—to become just one large playground for millionaires. In essentials, large stretches of England have for many years past been little else than that. And it is perhaps the inversion of that feeling that has given to land-owning its power to confer social precedence; for in essence the political strength of county families has been the fact that their rents from broad acres lifted them above the necessity of making a living by the commercialism that our legislature exists to control. They could, as it were, erect great town houses, because they drew their resources from the country, just as the county families that perpetually succeeded theirs could build great country houses out of town revenues.

Perhaps that tendency is on the wane; perhaps—and D——d might be evidence of the fact—it is on the increase. I imagine, however, that it remains really much the same—that when one of us, one of the ordinary half-town, half-country mortals that most of us are—when one of us shuts his eyes and builds his castle in the air, in his particular image of where and how he would live if he became really rich, some sort of D——d would arise, some sort of great house, not so vulgar, not so shining, lacking the electric-light wires that are trained to climb up trees and shine out amongst the astonished sparrows in their nests. We should have, no doubt, our town asylum; but substantially there would be large, tall or low rooms,

with high, clear or leaded windows, looking out upon a lake with water lilies, upon a sunny Italian garden, upon urns, statues of fauns, upon a paved courtyard, or upon the misty distances of lawns, the still forms, the branch-like antlers of tranquil deer.

We might or might not have our tall and quiet libraries ; we should have our long, still galleries of old pictures ; we should have our gun-rooms, our saddle-rooms, our boot-rooms, our still-rooms. We should have our great ranges of stables, our kennels, perhaps, and possibly our neat, pleasant home-farm. We should almost certainly have our immense and well-stocked coverts (with perhaps a litter or two of netted fox cubs) ; we should perhaps be too lazy to aspire to anything more than a very honorary mastership of our local Pytchley ; or we might, whilst building our castle, imagine ourselves endowed with the gift of hard riding, and enough of nerve and of energy. We might have our thatched pavilion, our smooth lawns, on which, each summer, our under-keepers, our stable-men, and our local curates should meet wandering teams of cricketers. Our outer architecture might be all stone or all black-and-white ; our fireplaces all Italian marble or all British oak. But if we are wise in our imaginings, though our halls gleam with marble, our argosies, as in the days of Bacchylides, will still be laden with Egyptian bales. I mean that, for our revenues, we shall still depend on investments other than those in land. We shall have acres enough to play with,

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

acres enough to give us consequence in the neighbourhood, but never one that would give us anxiety.

And there is D——d again, a little more mellow, a little less spick-and-span, without the champion heavy harness stallion that there would really be no fun in purchasing ready-made; but substantially there would be D——d, and the problem of what is to become of the real land as far away as ever. It will be objected that in my castle of Spain I have taken into account only the most material things—I have left out the soul. But our climate, our dear green turf, our good roads, our excellent railways, but above all our climate, are responsible for that. It was, I think, Charles II. who said that, upon the whole, the British weather was the best weather in the world, for in the whole year there is no day, either for its inclemency or its heat, so unpleasant that a man may not go abroad.

Our English great houses are out-of-door houses; our English country life is an out-of-door life. You do not, with all the expenditure, find concert-rooms, theatres, or studios as part of the English house design. A small German prince would solace himself in the winters and summers with an indoor and an outdoor orchestra. An ordinary Russian landed proprietor would have a number of his house serfs trained as actors. But we do not choose our servants on those lines. After all these years, the old Norse spirit survives in us—the spirit that dictated

the lines depicting how a man should feel after a hard day:—

“Who heedeth weariness
That hath been day-long on the mountain in the winter weather's
stress
And now stands in the lighted doorway and seeth the wives draw
nigh,
And heareth men dighting the banquet and the bed whereon he shall
lie? ”

If you substitute the coverts or the grouse moors or the saddle for “the mountain” of the second line, you have there the feeling of the whole of the really Utopian country-sides—the feelings to lead up to which the whole of wealthy rural England really exists. Fox-hunting, perhaps, has gone. It is said to be too expensive all round; it costs, say, two thousand pounds to keep a two-days-a-week pack now where it used to cost one thousand pounds; and with the present system of keeping the great shoots back, it is almost impossible to draw the best coverts till after Christmas; the foxes, preserved within wire enclosures, are too plentiful, and show no sport. Partridge shooting is no longer what it was, and the annual pheasant slaughter is a matter of two gorgeous days a year, instead of affording moderate occupation all the winter through. A pheasant costs a pound apiece to shoot, a partridge ten shillings, a salmon twenty-seven shillings per pound to the rod; and, so the old-fashioned sportsmen will tell you, all these things have gone to the deuce, because of the specialisation in all sports. Nevertheless the

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

spirit—that of the lighted doorway after the winter day—remains the dominant factor of our country life in its wealthier aspects, whether we rush down to it for three days out of the year in which we shoot into a sort of dark milky-way of pheasants, or whether we still have the heavenly luck to hunt five days a week.

It has, of course, its æsthetic and poetic sides too; without them it would probably not appeal to the Englishman, who is at bottom always at least a potential poet. In the long rides back do not we all remember the dying swirls of sunset in the winter skies, the still darkness of the Scotch firs, the gleam of light upon the laurels in the drive, and that sweetest of all sounds, the robin's song, from the dark bushes? Do not we all really remember the gleam of the bedroom candles as we lounge before our private and particular fire, too lazy, too luxuriating, too pleasantly reminiscent not to let the near clamour of the gong, reverberating along the great corridor, startle us before we have even begun to think of dressing? And, indeed, in a sense, the æsthetic satisfaction will remain to one through dinner-time, with its show of candles on women's shoulders, and through the long, lounging hour or two before the smoking-room fire. The body, as it were, being beaten and purified by the long day, the mind has the power to be appreciative, and we are as lazily attentive to effects of light and shade as to the smoke-room stories, or to the "shop" of the sport in which we may have sought this Nirvana.

It *is* a good life ; but how very much an out-of-door life ! Think of what an English country-house party is on a really torrential day—on a day on which even an English country lady will not go into the open. Think of the intolerable boredom of it. There is absolutely *nothing* to be done. In the dim, tall library a hunting-crop and a flask lie on the writing-desk, and you are not in the mood for a folio edition of Drydale's *Monasticon* ; you are not in the mood for a mechanical piano's rendering of the Seventh Symphony in the great drawing-room ; you are not in the mood for flirting in the little drawing-room ; you have written all the letters you can possibly write before breakfast—and the rain pours down. At last something really exciting occurs. Two self-sacrificing persons, the son of the house and his *fiancée*, having in desperation put on shiny mackintoshes and sou'-westers, stand, wind-blown and laughing figures, putting at clock-golf on the lawn just beneath the billiard-room window. And for as long as they will keep it up beneath the furious showers, you may stand with all the rest of the house party, watching them, and betting as to whether his skill—or his admiration for her pretty, wet, blonde cheeks—will make him win or lose the next five puts. When they are tired of it you may go to the stable and talk to your man as to how he is to get to the next house on your programme. There is nothing else for it.

The point is—of course one must qualify all these

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

generalisations with "as a rule"—there will be absolutely no resources in the house for any organised and general indoor occupation. As for building a concert-room or a theatre, the English territorial magnate would rather consider seriously the idea of erecting a covered tennis-court, since tennis is a game that a man may play till he is fifty, and improve all the time. Of course, the court, with its grilles and pent-houses, will cost a little more than a music-room, but then it will be of more social value. And, indeed, since there are so few days of an English year on which one cannot go out-of-doors, it is hardly of much value to make, in the arrangements of our everyday great houses, too much allowance for indoor occupations, which must inevitably be of an intellectual nature.*

* I do not wish to be taken as sneering at the intellectual faculties of the country gentleman, or to insinuate that no great noble has taken an interest in music or the fine arts, or that no house party has ever organised private theatricals, or occupied itself on rainy days in playing card-games. In how many country houses have we not been overwhelmed by the splendours of Raphaels, of Holbeins, of Snyders, of Vandykes, or even of Correggios? There is, of course, no land like the English country for them. And in how many noble libraries have we not longed to spend long hours? And no doubt, across the countries, one might still find scholars as fastidious or *dilettanti*, as keen as those who gathered together these dear and priceless things or erected those long and august corridors. Nevertheless the "note" of modern English country-life, in its social aspects, *does* seem to me to remain an out-of-door one; and on their social sides the great English land-owners do seem more and more to be directing their energies towards giving their friends that particular physico-sensuous feeling of well-being after stress of weather. So that, if one wanted to imagine a country Utopia, one would picture it, not as a land where it was always summer and always afternoon, but as a land where the year turned

Such, no doubt, and more or less, is the usual psychology of the really wealthy life as it is lived in the English counties. Naturally it is always in a state of fluescence ; the motor car may be affecting it ; one card game or another may be rising to fashion or falling into desuetude ; hunting may be becoming impossible, or shooting merely a means of organised boredom. But in the large that kind of life is very much alive, is very much "lived." Considered Utopianly, as an ideal, as a region where one may build castles in the air, it is not more really inspiring than any other. And if it draws its revenues from outside the land, it is merely D——d over again ; it is not, as a social phenomenon, more interesting than a life lived, say, in a gorgeous and uninspired palace of the Riviera.

But the moment that we can think of such a life as a growth of the soil, the moment we can think of the great house as being supported almost absolutely by the acres that surround it, we reach a different level of social interest. For then it is at least real and significant. It becomes even poignant ; for I have frequently felt aroused to interest when, in such a great house, I have been able to remember that, whilst the rest of the house-party were having as much of a "good time" as, to each one after his kind, the gods, his liver or his temperament, would vouchsafe — whilst all the

always between October and February, and where it was nearly always half-past six—when, naturally, it is too dark to look at pictures, and one feels too healthy to want to read books.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

rest were talking in knots, looking out of windows, running laughing along the corridors, there was, somewhere in some lower room, deep in the background of the great pile of buildings, in a sort of den hung round with maps and estate plans, in some office of one sort or other, a man with knitted brows engaged in getting out of the land the wherewithal to keep in motion all that light-hearted and pleasant life—the real landowner.

One knows very well that nowadays his is no very easy task. It is a desperate process of making two ends meet, and the tendency of this particular two ends is to get further and further apart; the wire of the circle as it were contracts and contracts between his hands that strive to draw them together. For whilst his rent-roll grows steadily less, his standard of living—which, if he is to lead his countryside, needs must vie with the standard set by townsmen—his standard of living grows more and more costly. He is hampered by the wastefulness of his ancestors, with acres of Italian gardens laid out by the second earl, with a mile of stone terraces planned by the eleventh marquis, or with a whole town of stables. All these things must be kept up, whilst rents are falling and whilst the hereditary pack costs two pounds for every one that it cost when rents were at their highest.

Of course the acres of garden should be turned into lawns, the gardeners sent to the right about, the stables pulled down, the stone balustrades allowed to crumble in the winter frosts; the hounds even should be once

more sent back to their trenchers. It is the day of desperate remedies ; but these things are comprehensibly bitter.

Naturally the keynote of the symphony is struck by a very different phrase. I was talking to one of the largest and most progressive landowners in the country, and he said—

“Well, you see, landowning as a business simply doesn’t pay any longer.” I doubt myself whether, “as a business,” it ever really *did* pay on that particular scale. As a rule the Italian gardens, the stone terraces, the stable towns were built originally by “spenders” or by men who had made money outside the land. They represent either trees cut down or successful manipulations of the funds ; either sales of outlying farms or grants from a grateful nation ; either newly-discovered coal-pits or the growth of manufacturing towns upon estates in another county. And the great land fortunes of to-day are regulated by all sorts of odd improvidences on the part of distant ancestors. Thus to-day the Earl of B—— is starving in his castle with his thousands of acres, because in 1840 his grandfather was powerful enough to prevent the passage of a railway within seven miles of his estate. And Lord L—— is a millionaire twice over because *his* grandfather could not prevent that railway’s trespass, and now the descendant owns two pottery towns which have covered the green grass. And there are, of course, instances of that sort of ill-luck or good to be heard everywhere for the asking.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

But, as a rule, land-owning as a business simply does not pay any longer. It would be premature to assert that it never will. Perhaps, owing to some unforeseen revolution of the wheel of fortune, owing, say, to the new fashion of week-ending, the landowner who has been forced to let his mansion to a financier will really see the end of his rainy days, will really come into his own again, and return once more to the sound of welcoming church-bells. Perhaps, in fact, the old system will simply come back again to its lusty growth. It is not, of course, by any means dead yet; you may discover throughout the length and breadth of the land hundreds of estates that pay very well; the old spirit of land-owning, its exclusiveness, its belief that the possession of secular title-deeds is ample atonement for the lack of good looks, good humour, wit, intellect, talent, or any other human quality. It is still, socially, nearly as good a thing as ever it was to be one of the Shropshire Thwaites and nothing else. But, upon the whole, it is not as good a "business."

And the real fight for existence will come not so much from the great landowner. The ownership of 40,000 acres and a castle is not so poignant a thing as to own 2,000 and an old house. The great man is, as a rule, much further from his fields and his trees. But the small one knows, sometimes, each blade of grass, and has for years debated with his father or his brother whether the view from the drawing-room would or would not be improved by cutting down

three old elms that stand two hundred yards away at the top of a rise. He will have pondered for years in his mind whether the day has come to give up the time of his estate carpenter to opening out the twelve windows that were blocked up at the time of the window-tax. He is, after all, the man who will fight bitterly for the retention of the present system. And all his retainers, his brothers, his sisters, even his old uncles, will fight with him.

For I do not know anything *quite* like standing on ground that one's ancestors have owned for a century or so. You have heard of garden paths, of coppices, of cow-stalls, of deer-licks; you have heard your people speak of them all your life. You will see in the house-diary just when your grandfather determined to make that fish-pond at the bottom of the lawn; in the same old books you will see when the high timber in the home-woods was last cut, and you will discover why that very old oak in the centre of the wood was spared then. It was because it reminded your great-grandmother of a tree under which *her* mother had sat two days before she died.

The struggle, with these smaller holders, is not so much to make both ends meet. It is not a matter of putting Italian gardens down to grass, or one of putting down ten or a dozen horses, of letting a castle here or there, and retaining still a princely income. One may say of Lord So-and-So that he is the luckiest man in the peerage, since, when his Towers was burnt down, he lost at once the necessity

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

of keeping up an enormous house erected by generations of "spenders" and received insurance indemnities amounting to a quarter-of-a-million pounds. But if the manor-house of Squire William burns he will receive little enough by way of insurance, and his rentals, when everything is deducted, will not bring him in seven hundred a-year on which to bring up five children and to maintain some sort of traditional splendour. And it will be the squire rather than the lord who will be cut to the heart at the thought of parting with his estate at a "times" price or for more. And it will be the squire, with his family, large in number and filled with the love of the family house, the trees, the fish-ponds and the paddocks—it will be all the great class of Shropshire Thwaites who will the most bitterly oppose any system of reform of land tenures. With those people, as with the others, landowning as a business has ceased as a rule to "be profitable." But they would rather pay for their sentiment, they would rather live on their seven hundred a-year than see their particular beloved holdings broken up into three or four hundred small plots and sold for a price that might make them for ever independent of the land. No doubt their sentiments are the right sentiments, and no doubt it is better for such men to wait with an anxious eye upon the markets in the hope that once again they may be able to ask from his farmers rents such as will enable him to send *all* his sons to Sandhurst.

The step from such a man to the farmer who owns

his own farm and from that farmer to the owner of two or three acres of accommodation land is not very far; but it is far enough. Yet, with them and the agricultural labourer, the whole of the community that lives directly out of the land is exhausted. There remains that curious middleman, the tenant farmer.

The really large tenant farmer, the man with sufficient energy and sufficient capital to manage fifteen hundred acres or so, is a business man for whom one may have a respect. He is a great employer of labour, an organiser, a man with special knowledge and with possibilities of self-adaptation. But I am inclined to see in the smaller tenant farmer the real weak spot of our rural system, the real inefficient third wheel that is cracking beneath the weight of this particular cart. Our present triple-stranded rope is made up of landlord, tenant, and labourer. It has been laid down over and over again, and I suppose it is true, that the land to-day will not show three profits, that one of this trio must go. It cannot very well be the agricultural labourer; it certainly will not be the landlord. It must then be the small tenant farmer.

The really large farmer, whether he "runs" a district of the Cotswolds on the ranche system, or really farms great plain-lands on the downs, pays a rent proportionately so small that he is, financially at least, in as good a position as his landlord, since what he loses in rent he gains by not having the fancy that he must maintain a feudal position. He *must* employ good workmen, since his supervision cannot be very

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

meticulous ; he must farm well, since his stake is so large that he cannot afford to change his tenancy once he is settled. And, his stake being so large, he has great power over his landlord. The small tenant farmer has neither these advantages nor these incentives. It pays him to cheat his hands, to neglect his hedges, to starve his land, to take scratch crops, to indulge in the hundred-and-one meannesses by which a hundred-and-one small profits may be gained.

I offer these views, of course, only for what they are worth, and as a purely personal contribution to a puzzling subject in which I profess to see no more clearly than five hundred of my neighbours. And were I in a position to initiate legislation I am not sure that I should do so upon the lines of a drastic abolition of this third wheel. I see the matter in this light, but I am by no means sure that it is not merely because of a "kink" in my own eyes. For I must confess that the small tenant farmer as a class does not interest me nearly as much as either the farm-labourer or the landowner. I am far less at home at the ordinary of a market-day than at the fireside of a ridge ale-house ; I feel myself more likely to come in contact with ignorant prejudice and self-conceit uttered in loud voices, and it has always seemed to me that, as a class, the tenant-farmer is just a tradesman like any other. He goes somewhat more into the open-air, but there the difference seems to end. He sells the produce of other men's handiwork, and he sells it very badly. If it be claimed for him that he directs that production,

it must be conceded that he directs it very badly. I have had it said to me, by a friend who knows tenant-farmers as well as I may claim to know the field-labourer, that the best farmers had, in his experience, almost always been something else. The most successful farmer he ever knew had been a linen-draper who had found the long hours of his trade too trying for his health. And, on the whole, my own observation would lead me to confirm the views of this particular friend, for the two most prosperous 300-acre tenant-farmers that I have known began life, the one as a country grocer, the other as a Wesleyan minister.

I ought, however, to add that one of the very worst farmers I know is also a country grocer and draper, a man who is singularly adept at all the tricks of farm-starving. He does certainly contrive to make his farm pay, and even pays his reduced rent very regularly; but the state of his hedges and of his farm-buildings makes me sigh whenever I think of them, and I should not like to be the tenant who will succeed him.

Nevertheless, the general moral of this seems to be merely that the farmer gains by having had at one period of his career some outside interest, some experience of a larger world, or at least some training in keeping accounts. For in these hard days and years farming, like everything else, has become a competitive business, and needs for success a thoroughly awakened man with an eye to public events, and perhaps, before all things, a power of combination.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

This the farmer never seems to have possessed ; he is not, in the councils of the nation, any better represented than is the field labourer. He is, for instance, hopelessly penalised by his railways, yet he never even thinks of combining to force down freight rates. He might not be successful even if he tried ; but he has never tried.

I write of him with some harshness ; but I am not blind to the pathos of his case. It will wring my heart when I think of the hopeless struggle made by many small men ; of the tired look in their eyes, of their thin beards, of their weary struggles with that most capricious of all the flails of Fate, the weather. But in spite of the pathos of it, this class of wearied and haggard men seems to me to be just precisely the wrong men in the wrong places. They have been on their farms for generations without getting any “forrader,” and in this bitter struggle the man who stands still must for ever be left behind.

I do not mean to say that there is no place for the small farmer, but I should like to see his particular farm regarded as being merely one stage in a definite career. Let me sketch perfunctorily my ideal parish, my particular Utopia of the present land system. For, at least under the present system, what seems to me to be sapping the land of its population, and sapping the population of its energies, is the fact that there is no chance, no *ignis fatuus* chance even of a career. If you are an agricultural labourer you have *no* chance of rising, you *cannot* take a small holding because there are none

to take; if you are a small holder you have no chance of getting a larger farm, and you have no chance of rising from farm to farm. Humanity being romantic, this means that no rural Dick Whittington will ever turn on any hill-top to listen to his chime of bells. What could the bells say to him? "Turn again, Whittington—and end in the workhouse." Now, if I had, say, 50,000 acres of mixed down, hill-side, woodland and marsh to play with, I should like to experiment with the holdings in some such arrangement as the following. I would have, say—

400 holdings of between 1 and 10 acres apiece,

	averaging 5	...	...	...	...	=	2,000 acres.
50 holdings of	20 acres apiece	...	...	...	...	=	1,000 ..
10	" "	150	"	"	...	=	1,500 ..
5	" "	300	"	"	...	=	1,500 ..
4	" "	500	"	"	...	=	2,000 ..
4	" "	1,000	"	"	...	=	4,000 ..
2	" "	5,000	"	"	...	=	10,000 ..
2	" "	10,000	"	"	...	=	20,000 ..

This would account for 42,000 acres, and the remaining 8,000 I would leave available for the pleasure-grounds of large houses, for villa residences, for week-end cottages, and for what not.

Here we should have, as it were, the manœuvring-ground for an army of 10,000 souls. So many thousand—the privates—would be the men and the families of the field labourers, men too young, too indolent, too dissipated, or too merely slow-brained ever to rise or to have risen. But such a man might save enough money to acquire a holding

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

of from one to ten acres ; or he might show enough intelligence to satisfy an agricultural bank that he could be trusted with money enough to be aided in the acquirement of such a holding. Then he would be, as it were, promoted to the rank of corporal or lance-corporal. He would have a holding not large enough to render himself quite self-supporting, and he would be there ready to be employed by the larger farmers at times when there was need for extra labour. And from that stage, either by proofs of saving or of being aided by the banks, he might be promoted to the rank, as it were, of a sergeant in this army—he might acquire a holding of twenty acres ; and so given luck or genius, he might go upwards until he or his sons might take one of the large mixed farms of five thousand, or one of the downland ranche farms of ten thousand acres.

Here there is a practicable scheme—practicable enough to a syndicate with a million of pounds to experiment with, and one needing nothing like special legislation to put it in force. I do not, of course, go into any detail, such as the planting of woodlands, which, in the winters, would provide so much and such attractive work to the poorer labourers ; nor yet such details as the providing of amusements, easy means of transit, or social centres. For these, after all, necessary as they are, are not so much of an attraction to keen men as is the chance of making a career. But here, at least, is a scheme, Utopian in a sense, but in a sense, too, founded on the eternal

necessity of mankind to struggle upwards. It would be a Utopia, but not one of those bright, cast-iron schemes in which all provision for development, for flux and reflux, all chances of change, are left out. And it would be practical, inasmuch as it would give a chance to keen men of entering the lowest ranks and of striving up to the highest. That, I think, is really what is wanted. It would give a chance, too, to the field labourer; it would be a means of tapping all that substratum which, as I have tried to prove in a previous chapter, contains *every* possibility. There are in the present-day cottages men and the children of men fitted to fill every position in such a community—men fitted to be workers, to be overseers, to be wood-reeves, to be farmers, and to be accountants. Modern education is excellent in its way, because it really does give some commencements of a wider outlook. And children so educated would be excellent recruits in such a land army, excellent raw material for such apprenticeships.

But if no such chances of a “career” be given, or if no such chances arise, there seems to me to be very little use in starting farm colonies, or bringing town labourers back to small holdings. Possibly the present generation, disillusioned as to the conditions of town life, might remain in the glebes and closes, but their children would inevitably recommence the process of going into the towns. The gain would be merely temporary.

I labour the point of the “career,” because I have

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

not anywhere seen it put as clearly as I should wish, and because it seems to me the most valuable contribution that I personally can make to this old-standing and intolerable problem. Once that could be settled, many other vexed points, such as that of housing, that of rentals, that of tenures, of land registration and transfer—even the really burning question of transport—would settle themselves. For such a community would be so powerful, and composed of units so bound together by common interests, that it would be able to make its voice heard and its power felt by all the railway-companies and the other vested interests that now so hamper the isolated “farmer.”

The question of land-tenure, as I have said, would settle itself upon the lines most profitable to all concerned. I am by no means certain that an individual possession of small holdings or of large farms would be really as free from objection as the ownership of the land by a public-spirited individual or a broadly-constituted syndicate, or that it would be as free from objection as the state ownership of the land. But I do think that the opening of an office—whether state, estate, or syndicate—where every man who wished it, and could produce, say, a voter’s qualification, where, in fact, every voter of a district could purchase on the lowest reasonable terms the right to a certain occupation of a certain minimum extent of land for a certain limit of time—where a man could ask to have an interest in the land as freely as he now can

purchase postage-stamps—the provision of such an office is one of the first duties of experimentalists in land reform.

No doubt we want, before all things, “data”; but the collection of statistics is an endless task, and the reading of meanings into these collections is little more than pleasant occupation for persons who have never had any dealings with the land. And at present the broad tendency of the real countryman is to say, “Leave things alone to right themselves.” The townsman meanwhile is crying out, “We must force the masses back to the land because we are on the eve of physical deterioration. We must send the old people back to form new and healthy blood with which in the future we once more may be recruited.”

For, upon the whole, the townsman, aware that the country interests have been neglected for the last sixty years so that the towns may grow, is itching to apply town methods of legislation to the country; and upon the whole, the country says, “Having neglected us for half a century, neglect us yet a little more so that we may work out our own ruin or salvation along the lines of supply and demand.”

And the problems set before the reforming townsman are bewildering enough. The young and confident cry out—“The whole thing will be solved by the provision of cheap cottages.”

“*I*,” says my friend the great Liberal landowner, “have just built 400 cottages at £200 apiece,” and he plumes himself upon his public spirit.

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

"But," cries out a new section of the young and confident, "the truck system must not apply. No employer, no landowner must build cottages for his own labourers, since that will mean that the labourer will take his rent in kind."

"Then how in the world is the trick to be done?" a good Tory of the old school growls sardonically. "I must build cottages on my neighbour's land, and the other fellow must build cottages on mine, I suppose?"

A young friend of mine, having no personal views, sober, quiet and essentially a listener, told me that one night, having tired himself for many months with collecting "data" and listening to "views," he fell asleep. He had formed no views of his own, perhaps he was incapable of an original effort. But he dreamt that he was on a certain terrace overlooking the Thames. At first he sat alone in a cane arm-chair, and he was saying dreamily—

"Something *ought* to be done for the land."

"Something is going to be done," said a voice at his elbow, and he saw that he had been joined by one of a Party that was coming into power then. "We are going to tax land-values. We are going to make land-owning such an expensive business that no one will *want* to own land. We need new sources of revenue."

"How will that help the farmer?" another voice said. A man from Lincolnshire had come upon the terrace, and many other figures were pouring desultorily into the open air from the tall windows of the gray buildings.

"What we need is intelligent labour. Give lessons in potato-planting at the Board Schools and do away with arithmetic."

"No, no!" cried a Northerner. "Make your Board School education even more literary than it is, but re-establish the living-in system on farms. It was when the boys learned their work on the farms and in them that the best labourers were bred."

"No. Away with the living-in system altogether," muttered an American Londoner. "It hinders the increase of population. Labourers who live in do not marry until they are old. We need all the children that we can beget or the country will be absolutely solitary."

"Something *ought* to be done," my friend murmured in his dream, but his murmur was a little less confident.

"We are going to tax all the large estates with a graduated tax so that the small holder will be encouraged," a working-man member fulminated. "We are going to drive out the Yankee millionaire who is turning the whole country into pleasure parks."

"That would be absolutely wrong," said one political economist. "That would drive money out of the country. The man who erects a D——d is spending more money on his pleasures than any farmer can. And pleasure is a commodity that a land may produce, just as much a commodity as corn is."

"But," said another political economist, "the point is whether five thousand planters on five thousand

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

acres of land will not produce more of some other commodity than will be produced in pleasure by one man with 5,000 acres of deer park."

"Oh, that's all nonsense!" said an ironical Conservative. And he proceeded to tell an anecdote of a lady of title who had disforested her deer-moors at the demand of her crofters. The crofters, at the year's end, had found that their rates went up to 27s. in the pound because the moors no longer paid deer-forest rates. The crofters had clamoured for the deer again.

"I'm rather in agreement with the deer-park man," said an Advanced Thinker, a little surprised to find himself in the same boat with the Conservative. "The real problem of to-day is *not* the re-population of the country, but the evolution of an ideal town. So, at least, it has always seemed to us who are the scientific sociologists. But still, since the subject is on the *tapis*, it should be an easy matter to evolve a really Utopian agricultural community. The really ideal——"

"If you will excuse me," said a Director, "I should wish to point out to you that a city which is at once the ideal town and the home of the ideal agricultural community is already under construction. Our prospectus says, 'This company has not been formed with the view of entering into a land speculation, its primary object being to promote a great social improvement, and to deal at once with the two vital questions of *overcrowding* in towns and *depopulation*'

lation of rural districts. The land comprised in the estate——”

“I have read your prospectus,” a Mathematician interrupted the lecture, “and it occurs to me that if your city were extended upon its present scale the whole country would be taken up before the whole population of the country was accommodated.”

“Besides,” a Political Historian took up the objections, “history teaches us that great industrial cities have always been caused to arise by natural features, such as rivers, sea-ports or, as is the case of Lancashire and its cotton cities, by a combination of sea-ports, rivers and atmospheric conditions. Now your city possesses *no* natural advantages except that it is within easy railway journey of the capital. It will therefore differ from no other suburb, will solve no problem, and will depend for its existence on the fact that the problem of housing in the capital has not yet been solved.”

“Let me remind you that you are getting far away from the problems of agriculture,” the Advanced Thinker once more took up his parable. “*I* stand for the future; therefore I surely before all others have the right here to be heard.”

The terrace by this time was entirely filled by disputants. They obscured the view for my friend whose dream had caused them to arise. He was surrounded and overwhelmed by their forms and by their voices. But giving way, as all crowds will do, to the disputant who made the most confident claim to a hearing, they

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

fell silent and paid attention to the Advanced Thinker. He lay back in his arm-chair, facing that of my friend who had dreamed him; he cleared his throat and, with the level intonation of one used to making long speeches and thinking long thoughts, he began, after having swallowed a jujube—

“The matter divides itself into several heads. In the first place it is open to doubt whether all reasons for the existence of the field labourer have not vanished with the advance of the applied sciences. We are now—or we are upon the point of being—able to reconstruct out of common clay, coal-tar products, and natural mineral oils, all the food-stuffs that are necessary for human sustenance. Let me, however, concede for the sake of argument that it would be possible to cultivate one staple commodity—say wheat—at a cheaper rate than its constituents could be evolved from coal-tar and reconstructed so as to be digestible and nutritive. Then we have constructed engines that, with the expenditure of the care of merely one man, will be able to scratch up, rake, furrow, roll, and cover practically unlimited acreages of land in the shortest of spaces of time.”

“How about my heavy clays?” cried a Norfolk farmer from the background.

“How about my light sands?” cried another. “I’ve had to give up steam ploughs and return to horses!”

“Details—details,” said the Advanced Thinker

unconcernedly. "I think I have proved to my hearers that even for purposes of cultivation the need for men upon the land has vanished."

"You need a man with a d——d good head-piece to drive one of my engines," said a steam-plough proprietor.

"Precisely—precisely," the Advanced Thinker retorted. "What we need is not men with a knowledge of soils, but skilful mechanics. *Any* soil, light or heavy, can be handled and clean ploughed by the *right* type of engine. But let me resume my train of thought. It seems to me, as to many of my friends who have spoken or not spoken, that the ultimate and the real function of the land is to become one vast pleasure park. We shall be rid, then, of the poor, warped, gnarled, unintelligent farm labourers, farmers, small holders, and the rest. We shall be rid once for all of the steam, the mire, and the grime of Mother Earth. We shall be able to breed a clean, straight-backed race of men, fit to meet and to solve the real problems that lie before humanity."

Loud cries of derision, of rage, and of mockery came from all the idealists of the now great assembly. Our friend the dreamer caught fragments of phrases : "Return to the earth," "Mother Nature," "The good, free air," "The health-giving, brown soil," "The truth of the broad heavens," and "The dignity of labour."

But the tumult stilled as dream tumults will still themselves, and the Advanced Thinker proceeded—

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

"Oh, well, since you *will* have mud-grubbers, let me sketch a really modern rural Utopia. . . ."

There were to be in the centre of this town or village great light and airy schools—these before all. Then there should be a library, communal cook and bake-houses, a vast communal eating-room where all meals should be taken in common, communal thrashing-barns and cold-storage barns, communal engine-sheds, communal theatres, concert-rooms, debating halls, and a place of free worship, communal barracks for communal domestic servants who should at convenient hours make the beds, dust, sweep, or decorate the individual cottages. These, small, white, beautiful in design, and not too close together, should cluster in a ring round one of the communal buildings, and from each cluster, radiating as the spokes of a wheel, there should run over the plain, cinder tracks along which the men should cycle to their holdings. . . . Here at least men might live the lives of men and find food for the mind along with a measure of health-giving labour. . . .

Stirred by this attractive vision of a white-walled township studded with a ring of trees, the spires of its communal buildings rising like tall poplars above the red roofs, the white walls, and the green plain like a great shallow bowl beneath a plain blue sky dotted with balloon-like pink and woolly clouds, itching to be nearer the realisation of this smiling and radiant vision, impatient for some one who should take the first step towards it, my dreaming friend moved

in his cane arm-chair and uttered his unfailing formula—

“Something must be done!”

And immediately the whole assembly began to cry out in a babel of tongues; a vast multitude of white faces, each with intent eyes, and opened, shouting mouths; a weird and tremendous crowd, like that in the gigantic imaginings of a great mediæval painter of a Last Judgment; thousands and thousands and millions and millions of voices, in all the tongues of the world, in all imaginable accents, with all the possible tones of assurance, began to cry out panaceas, all the first steps towards the solution of this problem. And each man of all the millions (the thing was apparent to the dream consciousness of my friend)—each man had a panacea that differed from that of his neighbour.

A cold chill, a weariness of nightmare, oppressed the dreamer, he half started from his chair, and found himself lying alone upon his own veranda in his own cane lounge. A suddenly arisen great gust of wind was rushing through the dark forms of the pines and poplars across the way, and against the full white face of the moon the form of a bat silhouetted itself for a minute.

“Certainly *something* must be done,” my friend said to himself.

The wind fell, and the poplars reached, tall, motionless, and black, towards the heavens.

L'ENVOI

“ BY ORDER OF THE
TRUSTEES . . .”





L'ENVOI

“BY ORDER OF THE TRUSTEES . . .”

OUT on the field before the house, in serrated rows that dwindle from the height of clothes-presses to the small clusters of jam jars showing above the tufts of already wintering grass, there lie all the paraphernalia with which a man throughout his life has attempted to stave off the bare terror of the four walls of his rooms. There is the old arm-chair in which he throned it for so long as the central figure of the small cluster of beings that went with him to the edge of the last descent that he should ever make. There, a mere bundle of brown pieces of wood, of sacking, of cordage and of screws, is the bed on which he passed so many nights; it confronts at last the grey sky from which during so many hours of darkness he hid; and ludicrous, pathetic or merely sordid, confronted as they are by the eternal truths of wind, weather, light and earth, from which they too hid so long, lie all the essential verities of a man's life.

Near the field-gate stands the thin blue figure of the policeman, a symbol of the law, with the pale light

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

glinting on his silvered buttons ; near him, fat, bearded and assured, stands the auctioneer, a symbol of the commerce that continues, though all men die ; plastered upon the gate-post, its bold black letters odd and pathetically frail, contrasted as they are with the aged spines of the high-road hedges, there shines the white placard whose first words read—

“By order of the Trustees of So-and-so, deceased.”

Far down in the meadow, huddled together in dull amazement, is the flock of sheep, the rightful tenantry of this October grass ; and entering the field, in knots or singly, desultorily, shyly, as sheep themselves enter an unaccustomed pasture, there come the buyers, who, gradually growing emboldened, saunter down the rows of “things” ; finger the worn curtains that once shut out the light ; sit warily in chairs that, meant for hard floors, sink ominously into the damp turf ; or turn round to the skies pictures of men in hunting coats who bear golden-headed children upon their shoulders.

A small nimble pony, frightened by an arriving motor-car, breaks away from the knot of traps tethered at the further gate-way. With its little dog-cart behind it, it runs round and round in the field as if it were performing some circus feat upon the soft tan of the turf. Men with their knees bent and their hands stretched out and downwards, narrow the circle around it. When at length it stops and allows itself to be caught, the occupants of the motor-car enter

the field as if they were the masquers of *Henry VIII.*, distinguished strangers from another planet. The auctioneer, having drunk from a case bottle and brushed some crumbs from his grey beard, mounts a kitchen chair; the crowd, sure now of a legitimate centre, close round him with faces already on the grin; an old saucepan is held above the heads of the crowd. The auctioneer says—

"Now here's a very valuable"

You do not hear the last word because already the laugh goes up. The sale has begun.

And, wandering among the least considered trifles of how many poor friends of mine (they will never be poor any more), I have often thought that that first laugh of the auction crowd marks the last stage in the dissolution of So-and-so. Never before, however poor or however despised he were, could his meanest household utensil be really laughed at. If it were only an old kettle, its holes stopped up with soap, so long as its owner kept it in use it would have about it some of the sanctity of the house itself, and some of the sanctity of a tool. And we never laugh at tools; the more old, the more battered, the more makeshift they may be, the more we admire its owner, since with them he performs feats of increasing difficulty. Nor, for the same reason perhaps, do we ever laugh at a poverty-stricken house, since that too is an implement, and, gazing at broken roofs, broken doors, gaping walls or apertured windows, we must needs wonder how a man, much such a one as

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

we are, can in it and by its aid perform that most desperate feat of all, thefeat of living.

As long as poor So-and-so kept things going with all these poor makeshifts, as long as the small bundle of odd bed-wrenches, broken chisels, disused clock keys and rusty pony-clippers formed a portion of his wordly goods that now forms "Lot 7"—as long as he lay still in an upper room, as long even as he retained a sort of corporate identity by means of the "Trustees of So-and-so" who have ordered this sale, for so long these poor things were still sharers of that reverence that we must pay to a man however despised. I remember being present when some farm-hands, from beneath a bed of rotting straw in an out-house corner, raked out old pipes, old boxes of matches, mouldy crusts of bread, mouldy rinds of gnawed cheese, and a battered tobacco-box. They were the horde of the village idiot who on that bed in that barn corner had six months before yielded up his soul to the clutches of a rigid frost. He had been dead six months, but in the face of these scraps of his we felt him suddenly to rise once more; he had been the last man to touch them; he had so ordered their lying there. And until they were kicked pell-mell out into the mixen before the door, his presence seemed still to stand in the corner of the barn. We called him "Poor Old Ben" remembered him, and to that extent paid to him the tribute that each man pays to the majesty of humanity in its units.

But the auctioneer is the ironist speaking from

beneath the august shadow of the eternal passing of life. He has taken the place of the gravediggers of *Hamlet*, and since a man's skull is so much less than his snuff-box a part of the man that we know, the auctioneer's broad, coarse or bitterly jocular comments are more winged than were ever those of the digger of graves. For the grave is inevitable and we accept it without protest ; but no man's Chippendale bureau set out on the grass need say inevitably, "To this favour we must all come." Every man must die ; but it seems always a little pitiful that any man should die so unbefriended that he has no one who will treasure up for his dead sake these most intimate of his associates, these his implicitly faithful vassals.

Yet in the end to these favours almost everything that is lasting must come. Heirlooms, descending as it were stage by stage in a funnel-shaped progress, must almost inevitably reach an outlet which is this of the auction. To the oldest of families there always comes a last member, and to that last member always his trustees. It is that at the best, since it is always good to be dead ; at the worst the trustees may be those "In Bankruptcy." Then selling is at its bitterest ; and each of the intermediate kinds of sellings means change, and every change is a thing that humanity must a little fear. Thus in that open field, beneath that grey sky, round the public jester upon his kitchen chair, the laughter of each man and woman rings ; a thought falsely. For who among us can be quite certain that it will not be his turn next to die

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

untreasured, to fail miserably, or to leave that country-side?

Countrymen rise and fall; the auctioneer is always at the flood of his eloquence. He is the one man of the rural world who is assured of prosperity, the one man certain to flourish all the more because of widespread ruin. It is always a little depressing to me to open my country paper about Michaelmas. There, in place of the familiar and uninteresting local notes of the central pages, I find, year after year, four immense sheets, an area almost as large as the main-sail of a yacht, given up to the announcements in small, broken print of forthcoming sales by auction. Glimpses of how many farms will not flash before one's eyes if one have really the heart to go through all those little poignant notices of failure, of decay, and of change. Here is Ruffian's Hill farm, with its great stone kitchen that one remembers best lit by one tiny candle flame; here is Penny Farthing farm with the great barns. Well, Higgins has gone; old Hooker has failed. Here is the Brook farm that stood so high, with the two twisted poplars, like plumes, on each side of it against the sky. Here are Coldharbour and the Court Lodge that Files ran. Well, rum-shrub is said to have caused *that* display of 210 sheep, so many drawing-room chairs, and so much live and dead farming stock beneath the inclement sky. Here too is Dog's Hill. Mrs. Hackinge has had to sell. We all knew she would ever since her husband hanged himself in the cart-lodge because hops fell below

“BY ORDER OF THE TRUSTEES . . .”

thirty shillings. Hackinge was always a wild-cat man, going in for poultry and apple farming, and selling feathers for mattresses and the Lord knows what.

Thus most of us shiver a little when we meet the auctioneer in his dog-cart briskly quartering the roads like a game-dog. It is as if on the hard road the shoes of his horse rapped out, “Change, change, change-ty-change”; it is as if his bright eyes saw the smut on how many fair fields of wheat, the foot-rot in how many flocks. And “change, change, change,” is the note of all country-sides. Yet it is astonishing how little the change is in evidence once the changes are made. You put a corrugated iron roof in place of the thatch on the great barn, and in two years’ time you have forgotten that the covering was ever dun-coloured and soft. You put James Harper into Penny Farthing in place of old Hooker, and, if you do not forget old Hooker, you wonder a little, when you think how well James Harper, who started as a weazened and niggardly innovator, has been bronzed, beaten and worried by weather till he fits into his place for all the world as well as old Hooker ever did. And one forgets, somehow, that old Hooker died before the telegraph office was opened at the Corner. One forgets even that he was there before the new tenants came to the Hall, and it startles one to hear them say that they do not even remember old Hooker’s mother, who trotted about on two sticks for a year-and-a-half after old Hooker died. These

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

people at the Hall do not even remember Miss Wilton, the post-mistress, though, when one comes to think of it, it does not seem possible that the hills can look quite the same without her to tear a hole in one's brown-paper parcels so that she might see what one's friends sent for Christmas.

Yet in spite of all these impossibilities there is the place, our heart of the country, very much the same. It is even more the same, since to all the original new impressions that it once made upon us there is superadded this cloud of little memories, these films of dust, these makings of histories. For in a sense it is just the deaths that go to make up the restfulnesses, the old associations, the glamours of each heart of the country. At each change we cry out, each death we lament, each bankrupt we shake by the hand and assure him that after his failure the place can never seem the same. Yet each of these changes hallows for us some spot ; each of them renders some corner of a corner more sacred, more intimately our own by right of memories. We do not, as it were, discover the Fountain of Youth that we set out to seek ; but we do find out, little by little, the secret of growing old mellowly and with reverence. We discover suddenly that we are one of the few who can remember when Penny Farthing tithe-barn was thatched, who can remember an old fellow called Hooker. He used to break in a team of black oxen to the plough every year, and, wild as you may think the idea, it paid him very well. If he had call to use them for any press

“BY ORDER OF THE TRUSTEES . . .”

of plough-work, there they were ; if not, he fattened them off just like any other bullock, and nothing lost save the small pains he had been at. And, sitting by the fire one winter night when it is too wild to get out and too wild for a friend to come in, one will surprise oneself by trying to remember how the place looked when first, by birth or by imagination, we opened our eyes upon it. And we shall surprise ourselves by saying : “Why, it *isn’t* the same place at all.” For so gradually will the change have come that we shall never have heeded it in the large ; the spirit of the place will seem to remain utterly the same. It is that sort of feeling that prompted the direction that I once received in a strange country-side—

“You go down the lane till you come to the place where Farmer Banks’s old barn used to stand when he kept six cows in it.”

In the imagination of the speaker, the barn and even the cows existed hazily, but not more hazily than did the now cleared field ; the field was there, cleared, but not more real than the barns of some years ago. This detritus of the dead, this dust left, as it were, in a film, is like the “patina” that gives value to old bronzes, like the age and yellowness that give tone to old ivories. We see our country-sides through this veil, and the trees, the hillocks, and the smithies seem to speak to us with human voices. In other lands, in lands to which we can attach no associations, a hill is just a hill, a river a river. Without

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

at least a fictitious crop of historic facts no scenery would hold us. The plains of France to us may be fair; but if we cannot at least invent for ourselves some sort of scheme of all the dead who have ploughed them up, fertilised them with their blood, or ridden over them towards love or death, without some cloud of human ghosts to people them, we shall not settle down amidst the hedges of Brittany. California has its brilliant hues, its great gorges, its vast prospects, but they will not really hold us; neither will the lakes, the swards, the green trees of those most beautiful of islands, New Zealand. Work might keep us there, the chance of profit, or even the hope of healing a damaged lung; but no spirit of the place calls us. Many of us may love solitude; we may hate the sight of living man; but few can dispense with the invisible presence of the dead—of the dead that the auctioneer with his croaking jokes long has since doomed to oblivion.

Changes may worry us dreadfully—the cutting down of familiar avenues, the setting up of wire fences in place of old hedgerows; but as long as the changes are real in the sense of being called for by the spirit of the age we shall at last accept them and make them a part of our spirit of the place. It is only when, as in the case of that most odious of all things, the restoration of old churches and old buildings—it is only when the changes are out of touch with modernity—when, in fact, the changes are “fakes,” that they will remain for ever eye-sores, that they

will for ever strike false notes. A landowner that I knew has erected some brick pigsties in a lovely old orchard. At first I hated them ; but little by little I have grown accustomed to the sight of the buildings and the “feeling” of the pigs. I have grown to feel that the pigs were more or less necessary, and that the sties, because they are suited for their purpose, are neither distasteful nor vulgar. But every time that I pass our old church, now, alas ! picked clean and white as dry bones are clean and white, I shudder a little, and every time I enter our fine old Hall that has been spoiled by the addition of a new wing in a style limply aping the mediaeval.

These latter changes are imitative and are meaningless ; but the others we accept. If it be the fate of the country to be turned into one vast territory of pleasure parks eventually, we shall accept the pleasure park as the standard, just as now, upon the whole, we accept the small farm ; if it be the fate of the country to be cut up into squares for small holders, sooner or later we or our children will accept the fact that every view over dales and valleys will appear like a never-ending draught-board. The eye will accept its freedom to travel over miles and miles, just as nowadays it welcomes its imprisonment by hedgerow after hedgerow, and the flat sweep of cultivated territory will be as much the country as is to-day the closed-in maze that we love. In the region of change that is the country, change is, in short, the very breath of life, the sole thing that we

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

have to comment on, the sole basis of the news that keeps us all going.

And it all goes so very slowly. Last year I took a late October walk down a long valley. It had been one of those days that one loves and lingers through, as if they must be our last on a pleasant earth. The valley was broad, the grass covered with a bluish haze, the sunshine was very red, the river ran sluggishly between high banks. The year was dying away, so that each minute of sunlight seemed a precious gift, and the day died so fast that hardly could one resist the attempt to hold it, physically, by some gesture of the hands, by some effort of the will. It was one of those days that, one is acutely aware, can never return. Other days pass, and are no doubt reckoned; this will live for ever in the memory. Winter was coming, night, sleep—and who knows whether not death itself?

But suddenly, on changing the direction at the turn of the river, there before us, close at hand in the absolutely still air, all warmed with the wash of light from the low sun, was the little range of hills that bound the valley. And everything on them had a quaint distinctness. Below was the golden roof of a farm that might have been a roof in Caxton's day; just before it was a rush-thatched hut, its background small, green, foreshortened fields like squares in a pattern, and all flat. And appearing so exactly above the hut that it seemed as if they must fall down the smoking brick chimneys were a ploughman and his

“BY ORDER OF THE TRUSTEES . . .”

team moving swiftly—two black horses and two white, a boy with a harrow following, and to one side a man with a seed-trough slung round him, sowing with both hands. Even at that distance one could see the light haze of the flying seeds. It might have been a coloured picture in a child’s book of to-day; it might, without the change of a visible detail, have been a picture in a missal. Just over the bank was the great high-road along which the motor-cars screamed; just beyond that, over the hill and out of sight, was a great, broad, hedgeless “scientific” farm. But, standing there that afternoon, and walking back in the dying day for miles along that bank, we might, for all the eye could see, have been there this afternoon or half a millennium ago, so slowly does always moving Change move in the heart of the country. If there we do not find the Fountain of Youth, there at least we may learn to grow old without perceiving it, to fuse into the tide of humanity that individually matters so little—the tide of humanity that in its course across the earth has smoothed and rounded so many hill-tops, has altered the lines of so many fields, has bound down so many rivers to their courses, has held back the sea from so many wildernesses of marsh and fen, has fought so bravely, with so little glory, so long a fight against the irresistible forces of Nature.

Nature is, indeed, at once the auctioneer and the trustee of us men who walk the turrows in the heart of the country—the trustee rather than the auctioneer,

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

since the price of labour that we pay goes into no pocket other than ours. Men, so long ago, scraped and furrowed the ridges that terrace the dun faces of the great slopes, and Nature hands them down to us who have forgotten even what those old householders looked like. We have forgotten them, just as we have forgotten how that dead man looked who sat, years ago, in the arm-chair that we bought off the grass—in the arm-chair in which now one of us thrones it, the king of a tiny clan, the leader of a little caravan-load of mortals—the leader for a short moment across the small holding of time that shall still be ours.

THE END

THE LIBRARY OF

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



SANTA BARBARA

THE LIBRARY OF



OF CALIFORNIA

THE LIBRARY OF



**THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Santa Barbara**

**THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW.**

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A A

001 427 662

0



